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Praying in Washington

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

In his closing remarks at the 61st annual National Prayer Breakfast on Feb. 7, Johns Hopkins Hospital's Dr. Benjamin Carson Sr.* spoke of the American bald eagle soaring on two wings: one right, one left.

Moral of his story: We need both wings to fly straight.

Carson said some interesting things about health care. He didn't use the term, but he clearly does not like "Obamacare," and he made it known from a podium five feet from the president. This was, after all, a prayer breakfast mainly attended by evangelical Christians. Not exactly a hotbed of liberalism.

Sponsored by the conservative Fellowship Foundation, the bipartisan event each February brings politicians, social activists and lots of wealthy individuals to Washington to pray for the United States. This year, 3,500 folks crowded into the Washington Hilton's International Ballroom and at least one overflow room to hear greetings and prayers from Democrats and Republicans alike.

Following fresh fruit, bagels and mini quiches, co-chairs Sens. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) and Mark Pryor (D-Ark.) greeted the crowd. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) read from Isaiah 55 and former North Carolina Republican Sen. Elizabeth Dole read from Hebrews. The Chief of Naval Operations prayed for national leaders. Labor Secretary Ken Salazar read a prayer by Cesar Chavez. The main speakers, Carson and President Barack Obama, delivered remarks sometimes strong and sometimes wistful. Andrea Bocelli sang. And the tiny Olympic gold medal gymnast Gabrielle Douglas stood on a box to read the closing prayer.

I wasn't the only Catholic in the packed ballroom, but it was close. The largely fundamentalist Christian event mainly gathers good people who do good works or pay for them, all in the name of Jesus. There were Baptists and Presbyterians and Episcopalians and all manner of evangelicals. All told, when they're

not doing or paying, it seems they are lobbying.

They're a tough act to follow. They don't just like Matthew 25 (feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned); they live it. I met a young black attorney from California who is building a hospital in Nigeria and the president of CRISTA Ministries in Seattle, which serves 8 million people in 30 countries each year. There was a smattering of somewhat wide-eyed midshipmen from the U.S. Naval Academy, delighted to be confirmed in their service. My table host at the breakfast was a Nebraska orthodontist. I bet he tithes, and the people of Omaha are the better for it.

I couldn't help but think about the main body of the crowd as being from the "other billion." Catholic myopia often obscures the fact that just about half the world's more than 2.1 billion Christians are not Catholic. Ecumenism is as tough to achieve as it is to pronounce. Only a pie-in-the-sky optimist can believe that the other half always has good things to say about Catholicism. That's when Rodney King's famous request during the 1992 Los Angeles riots comes to mind: "Can we all get along?"

I mean, can we? I tend to think the Christian net is bigger than any other. There is more that joins us than separates us, even as we build barriers around our own and other's tables. There was lots of talking at the prayer breakfast -- lots of "table fellowship" -- we ate, prayed, conversed and talked about Jesus. Overall, not a bad way to start a day.

And it wasn't only Christians in the room. It was less about religion and more about doing what that Jewish prophet had to say to all humanity in the best sense of interfaith understanding.

It took one of the international guests to bring the whole event into sharp focus. Toward the end of the morning, after performing the Schubert "Ave Maria," Bocelli asked if he might say something. His simple and moving words underscored the hope -- the pledge, even -- that a political system could fly straight with two wings, provided both sides worked together. He said he had never been to such an event -- never heard of such an event -- and he would bring news of the event back to his country, to Italy, where the political parties are so very divided, and perhaps they could learn to at least pray and then talk about what divides them and even what unites them.

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Would that we could all do the same in our own divided lives, wherever we may be.

**An earlier version of this story misstated where Carson works.*

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