

Boston cardinal urges social ministry gathering to focus on mission

Jerry Filteau | Mar. 1, 2013

Washington

Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley kicked off the 2013 national Catholic Social Ministry Gathering by urging its 450 participants to use their time together to discern their vocation in the church and world.

In his 40-minute opening address Feb. 10, he repeatedly highlighted the contrast between true Christian discipleship and the expectations of the current secular world, "obsessed with celebrities," in which U.S. Catholics must live their daily lives.

"Business as usual is not enough" to confront the missionary, social justice, evangelical and other challenges that Catholic disciples of Christ face in today's U.S. society, he said.

U.S. Catholics today are called to move "from a maintenance mode to a missionary mode" of not just supporting those who already believe but drawing others into the faith, he said.

"Teaching the faith is always a process of mentoring," he added, saying that catechetical education, while teaching the truths of the faith, must always be "experiential," preparing those being catechized for a life of "faithful discipleship."

The Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, co-sponsored by about 20 national Catholic organizations, including several agencies of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is an annual meeting in Washington that draws leaders of diocesan social action offices, national and local volunteer agencies, and a variety of other Catholic leaders involved in advocating or carrying out the church's Catholic social teaching.

About 450 social ministry leaders from across the United States, including some 150 first-time participants, attended the four-day gathering.

It included a Feb. 12 visit by state delegations to their Senate and House representatives on Capitol Hill to lobby for legislation -- perhaps most notably for a "circle of protection" around programs for the most poor and vulnerable at home and abroad as Congress appears headed toward drastic budget cuts across the board.

The morning of Feb. 11, the first full day of the gathering's four-day meeting, economist Charles Clark of St. John's University in New York reminded participants that "economics started out as a branch of moral philosophy" and that the economic choices individuals or societies make are moral choices.

When a nation's economic structures or institutions are inclusive, they create wealth, he said, but when they are exclusive, they promote scarcity and "wealth capture" for those who already have wealth.

Economic choices, like other choices, "require criteria for choosing," and ethical standards and moral reasoning ought to form those criteria, he said.

Against the argument that all economic choices are based on self-interest, he quoted St. Thomas Aquinas: "The

idea that man need only seek his own private good contradicts both charity and reason."

Against the self-interest model, he argued for a "people-centered" economic model that asks the basic questions raised in the U.S. bishops' 1986 pastoral, "Economic Justice for All":

- "What does the economy do for people?"
- "What does the economy do to people?"
- "How do people participate in the economy?"

Catholic social teaching is "moral theology applied to economic, social and political issues," but it is not a new economic theory or "a third way between capitalism and socialism," he said.

Rather, he said, it is based on universal principles found in Catholic social thought, such as the dignity of the human person, the right of participation, the common good, and the universal destination of goods.

He called argument over the size of government "a fake issue." The principle of subsidiarity, he said, is two-pronged: It means that any level of government should be as small as possible, but as big as necessary.

Citing the examples of recent economic crises in Greece, Spain and elsewhere, he said, "Austerity will make high unemployment the new norm. ... You can't cut your way to prosperity."

Commenting on efforts to cut education and health care funding to balance the budget, he said, "Stupid and sick is not good economic strategy."

The biggest problem in the current U.S. economic structure, Clark said, is that "economic growth is not filtering down to the poor" but is being captured increasingly by those who are already very well-off.

Eric Mitchell, director of government relations at Bread for the World, a leading interfaith agency working to end hunger at home and abroad, urged the gathering to lobby hard for the "circle of protection" for government programs for the poor when they went to Capitol Hill Feb. 13 to meet with their representatives in the House and Senate.

Citing SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, formerly referred to as food stamps) and other federal food programs for poor women and children, Mitchell said that while churches and other nonprofits are engaged in extensive activities to feed the hungry, "95 percent of food aid to the poor comes from the federal government."

SNAP "feeds 44.7 million people a month," of whom "99 percent are below the poverty level," he said. The food aid amounts to \$4.30 a day per person, he said.

If legislators argue that the government needs to cut back and "charities need to step up," Mitchell said, participants need to counter that churches and charities do not have the resources to make up for such government cutbacks.

"Ending poverty and hunger is not a Democratic issue. Ending poverty and hunger is not a Republican issue," he said. "It is the right thing to do."

Michele Broemmelsiek, Catholic Relief Services vice president for overseas operations, made a similar plea to oppose any budget reductions for U.S. aid overseas, noting that only half a percent of the entire federal budget is devoted to humanitarian and development aid abroad.

She cited the dramatic differences she saw in Zambia before U.S. assistance to combat AIDS, when in a nation

of only 12 million people, "every day over 300 people died of AIDS," and now, when CRS programs there are helping hundreds of thousands of people to live productive lives although they are HIV-positive.

CRS depends on U.S.-funded foreign aid programs to magnify the impact of Catholic donations to combat poverty, drought, natural disasters, violence and other problems around the globe, she said.

Clark said that anything spent on a social program such as SNAP or unemployment insurance contributes "five times more growth per dollar than cutting taxes" because the money spent on such social programs circulates through the economic system far more than any dollar that better-off citizens receive through lower taxes.

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