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Social ministry transcends 'ghostly' divisions

by Arthur Jones

Perspective

Understandably, the audience could have been offended by the statement. Admirably, it wasn't; it was understood. The "Vatican II -- Then and Now" session panelist, an open-faced and pleasantly mannered Steve Dear, a man in his late 40s, said that compared to the dynamism of community and concern for social justice that was prevalent in the Catholic schools and Catholic faith communities he grew up in during the 1970s and '80s "the church today seems like a ghost town." As he looked out at the audience of 120 or so attendees, he saw mainly people two and three decades ahead of him.*

This was one of the final afternoon sessions of the Baltimore archdiocese's all-day 34th Social Ministry Convocation, on the theme of "The Church in the Modern World: 50 years after Vatican II."

Slightly stunned by his own phrase, Dear, a key figure in People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, asked his fellow panelists if he'd gone too far.

But Dear's question had been posed earlier, differently, during the morning keynote address in the same space. More than 360 people were present for that one before fanning out to any of a dozen workshops. A member of the audience told keynote speaker Mark Shriver, "Activism was part of our platform in high school and college. It seems to be falling down. The young don't seem interested in what we're interested in." Why weren't they here? Shriver said he didn't intend to put her on the spot, but had she brought her children? He admitted his own 15-year-old son wasn't present.

The questioner explained that her children were all out of state. But the larger question raised, why so few people in their 20s to 40s involved themselves in church, hung over the session in the large and comfortable Seton Keough High School auditorium. (There were eye-catching glittering sateens in day-glo greens and red draped around a cross on the stage. The hall's walls are painted green. On the Pantone

Color Chart there's probably a paint shade called "Catholic green" -- a sort of anemic, bleached shamrock.)

One of Dear's fellow panelists, Mercy Sr. Mary Aquin O'Neill of Baltimore's Mount St. Agnes College, replied to his anxious question. She explained that her friend Jesuit Fr. John O'Donahue "talks about the church above and the church alongside of." The church alongside of is alive and well, she said; the church above is in trouble, "not ghostly, but ghastly."

Panelist Therese Wilson Favors, recently retired director of Baltimore's African American Catholic Ministries, energetically assured Dear that it was the young people in her parish, St. Cecilia, and nearby St. Francis Xavier who were pushing the older ones, keeping them involved. But pushing to be heard was second nature to black Catholics, she said. It was, she said, the only way they'd ever gained "a seat at the table."

Happily, in most of the panel sessions, the age range was bunched around the 40s-50s mark. One presenter, Regan Vaughan, from Catholic Charities of Baltimore, a lawyer with 3-month-old twins at home, brought the median age down nicely. And she gave a fact-packed, activist presentation that had people scribbling down website addresses and information. Vaughan illustrated which bills before the Maryland state legislature she and her Catholic Charities colleague worked in coalitions to support and why. She explained -- she'd had morning and afternoon sessions -- how parishes could click a computer button to get their delegates behind those bills. Some things never die. Vaughan was constituency-building, a Catholic tradition as old as Tammany Hall politics. And just as successful.

Baltimoreans know how to stir a crowd. The day began with a performance from a choir so young as to be remarkable: The ages ranged from about 3 (she knew all her words) to 12. That was followed by a full-force "We Shall Overcome" from an adult choir joined by a mixed-race audience that understood the words in all their dimensions -- blacks and whites and Latinos and Asians all with their own take on its significance. Both choirs were from St. John the Evangelist Church in Columbia, Md.

Msgr. William Burke, the man who, with two urban priest friends and two women religious friends from Catholic Charities, founded the annual convocation in 1979, opened the day. He'd been appointed the local head of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. The campaign "had two thrusts: to raise money and education [and] to raise consciousness by getting people involved," Burke told *NCR*. He had wondered how best to do that, and decided tying the widespread parishes' social ministries activities together was a start, and might encourage parishes without ministries to join in. Amazingly, annual convocation attendance numbers have remained constant, somewhere between 350-400, ever since.

Burke's welcome was followed by Archbishop William Lori's brief remarks and a blessing. Lori, who would have been a 29-year-old priest when the convocation began, spoke on the heart of *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) and the recognition of the "inalienable human dignity it encouraged." He spoke of the beatitudes "as a self-portrait of Christ" -- a phrase that if original is admirable and if borrowed is still worthwhile and telling. Social ministry, Lori said, "is not easy work, but it is beautiful work. It flows from what we believe, from our worship, from our private prayer, in a marvelous consistency. A seamless garment."

Burke and Shriver had known each other from Frank's Pizza sessions during the time Shriver was working in Baltimore's tough Cherry Hill district with children who were poor, delinquent, abused and destined to fail. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development offered his program a grant and Mark Shriver called his father, Sargent Shriver, to ask if he should accept it. His practical dad told him he was already accepting Jewish money; Catholic was just as good.

The Shriver family is intimately tied into Baltimore archdiocesan history -- Cardinal James Gibbons was Sargent Shriver's godfather. Mark Shriver tied the Cherry Hill kids of two decades ago into his work with Save the Children today. The same harsh facts still hold true: that an American baby born into poverty would, by the age of 4, be educationally 18 months behind a non-poor child. Shriver asked: How can they catch up? Only the rare few manage it. Shriver also talked tellingly about his father, inspirational stories from his recent book, *A Good Man: Rediscovering My Father, Sargent Shriver*.

The age gap wasn't the only division in the room. At least one other, far less apparent, surfaced in a question that, unfortunately, I was the only one to hear. I was seated at the rear of the room for Vaughan's panel. As the sessions ended, the woman to my right said, "I feel so uncomfortable here. I'm a Republican and an NRA member, but I believe in social ministries work. But I feel so labeled by what I hear." If we are all Catholics together, she wanted to know, why do we label one another? I stumbled out a bromide -- that on social issues I was to the left of Lenin, but I was a fiscal conservative. Yet there was enough guilt spilling from her question to spread around, and I felt a fair amount rightly splash on me.

[Arthur Jones is *NCR* books editor. His email address is arthurjones@comcast.net.]

***Editor's Note:** Steve Dear objected to an earlier version of this story, which he said "seriously misquoted" him. In an email to NCR, Dear wrote, "I never said the church or the audience was 'ghostly.' I do not know what that statement means. I said that compared to the dynamism of community and concern for social justice that I had described as prevalent in the Catholic schools and Catholic faith communities I grew up in during the 1970s and '80s 'the church today seems like a ghost town.' I also was in no way describing the audience at the convocation that day. I would never insult an audience like that."

Arthur Jones offered this reply: "As Steve Dear's fellow panelist, Sr. Mary Aquin subsequently picked up on Dear's phrase with her remark, 'not ghostly, but ghastly,' I am uncertain what to add. But if Steve Dear feels he was misrepresented, I certainly apologize."

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