

Panel: Catholics must make better connections between militarism, racism, poverty

Tom Roberts | Aug. 28, 2013
Washington

The Catholic community must be more forceful in making the connections between militarism, racism and poverty, the head of the country's largest Catholic peace organization said Sunday during a panel discussion, one of the activities this week in the nation's capital tied to observance of the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

"We have been too silent and too complacent" regarding the issues of racism, militarism and poverty and in drawing connections among them, said Sr. Patricia Chappell of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, executive director of Pax Christi USA. "We have to make those connections. We have to help people understand how the budget that is being proposed for arms and drones and all of that, how that, in fact, impacts the neighborhoods and communities we come from."

Chappell, the former president of the National Black Sisters' Conference, said as a 13-year-old, she watched people in her neighborhood hold dinners and sell food to raise money to take a bus to Washington for the Aug. 28, 1963, march.

"There was a sense of pride; there was a sense of a new Pentecost," she said, recalling how people crowded into homes of those who owned television sets to watch news accounts of the event. "We knew something important was happening."

The anniversary will be observed Wednesday* with a ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial and a speech by President Barack Obama.

Chappell was one of four participants in "A Catholic Conversation on Race, Religion and the March on Washington," hosted by Holy Redeemer Catholic Church in Washington, D.C., and co-sponsored by Catholic Democrats, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, and Pax Christi USA.

Others on the panel were John Carr, director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University; Donna Toliver Grimes, assistant director of African-American affairs in the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; and U.S. Labor Secretary Thomas E. Perez. Ralph McCloud, director of the USCCB's Catholic Campaign for Human Development, moderated the panel.

During a Mass preceding the discussion, Fr. Dave A. Bava, pastor of Holy Redeemer, recounted the often dismal record of the Catholic church prior to and during the civil rights era. But he also recalled the role of Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle, archbishop of Washington and son of a Pennsylvania steelworker, who began desegregating the city's Catholic schools approximately six years before the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling struck down the principle of separate but equal schools. O'Boyle gave the invocation

on the day of King's famous speech.

The original march, which was about jobs as well as equal treatment in areas such as voting, has resonance today, Perez said. Despite advances in civil rights -- including the election of an African-American president, increasing numbers of minority political leaders, and more women on the Supreme Court and in Congress -- he said "for many, the distance between the rungs on the ladder is getting further and further."

Perez listed four areas that should be a focus of action for those seeking ways to continue the legacy of King's work. First is the Affordable Care Act, also known as "Obamacare." Perez quoted King in emphasizing the importance of the legislation: "Of all the forms of injustice," King said, "inequality in health care is the most shocking and inhumane."

Perez said it is vital to get the word out to those who could benefit most from access to health care -- the underinsured and uninsured, who are also often the unemployed -- that open enrollment in universal health care begins Oct. 1.

He also listed the other Obama administrative legislative ambition -- comprehensive immigration reform -- as both a moral and economic necessity.

"Eleven million people need to be brought out of the shadows and into the sunshine," he said.

Perez urged an increase in minimum wage and legislative restoration of sections of the Voting Rights Act that a recent Supreme Court decision nullified.

Carr, who worked for more than two decades as executive director of the USCCB's Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, said he feared the significance of religious participation in the original march is being lost in the current observances of it. But O'Boyle was not the only religious leader on the dais that day: The head of the National Council of Churches, a rabbi, and the head of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice also spoke to the hundreds of thousands who gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

"And the *Reverend* Dr. Martin Luther King spoke," Carr said. "And he gave a sermon, not a speech. I worry that we're losing the moral dimension, that we're losing the religious dimension, and that diminishes both religion and public life."

Chappell evoked cheers and applause when she elaborated on the church's failings in the civil rights arena, a failure that continues today when the church's social teachings are ignored, she said.

"We have to go back to the social teachings of the church [that] make clear what our moral obligation is to and for each other," she said.

She said many African-Americans "have not even been educated to the fact that these teachings exist." Consequently, she said, many "don't see themselves qualified to even ask questions" of the church about issues important to them.

"Let's keep it real," she said. "We have to recognize that our institutional church oftentimes did not do much" during the civil rights era. She said there were individuals who became involved, "but as an institution, we were a day late and a dime short."

Grimes said one of the more hopeful trends in the church today is the growing diversity in parishes. Where once single-ethnicity parishes existed, congregations today are increasingly made up of people from many cultures who speak a variety of languages and find ways to pray and work together.

Catholic Democrats first proposed the panel when the organization's president, Steven Krueger, realized little was planned specifically for Catholics joining in the observances of the anniversary. About 150 people attended the session at Holy Redeemer and, when McCloud asked for a show of hands of those who attended the original march, between 20 and 25 people responded.

Krueger said the event "was intended to be a bridge between Catholic involvement in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the unfinished business of the 1963 march today based on the Catholic social justice tradition. It is a 'next first step' on a journey that we hope may serve as an impetus for a national conversation on racial justice in parishes, dioceses and faith-based communities across our land."

**An earlier version of this story listed an incorrect date for the anniversary.*

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