

"Are All Welcome? Race in the Church Today"

It was an historic, powerful, and Spirit-filled event. On January 28-29, about 300 people gathered at the University of Dayton for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati's Forum on Race "Are All Welcome? Race in the Church Today." According to keynote speaker Rev. Bryan N. Massingale, S.T.D., this was the first time an archdiocese in the U.S devoted an entire event to the topic of race. The planning committee from the Archdiocese, ably led by the Director of African American Ministries Deacon Royce Winters, worked for almost two years to bring this long-overdue conversation to fruition. Although the process was not without hurdles, they garnered the necessary and helpful support of Archbishop Dennis Schnurr and many other staff members from the Archdiocese and the University of Dayton.

The Forum began with an exuberant prayer service and a presentation of moving personal testimonies from people who have felt excluded from the Church due to their race. Their anguished voices were accompanied by somber music and a beautiful performance by a local dance troupe. This set the stage for Fr. Massingale, who delivered a rich and prophetic address in which he described old and new forms of racism, including "foreignness" as a cloak for racism. He also argued that while the Church has not done enough to overcome racism, Roman Catholicism possesses "a fundamental symbol structure of radical egalitarianism." In the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist we are all equals, and when practiced well these sacraments can promote cross-racial solidarity.

Dr. C. Vanessa White of the Chicago Theological Union struck some similar notes in her keynote address about the Catholic tradition's failures in the face of racism, calling upon her own experiences of discrimination as an African-American woman in the church. She also described ten ways that racism has a deleterious effect on the lives of minorities, both in the past and today. For example, people of color are not always given equal voice in our institutions, and are often hired into jobs with little power and ability to enact positive change. She challenged the church to do its part to eliminate such practices.

For my part, I spoke of the continuing relevance of the 1979 USCCB pastoral letter on racism *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. I argued that its understanding of the persistent forms of racism, in both personal and structural forms, apply to the situation today. I also contended that the duty to evangelize requires the church to do more to ensure that its condemnation of racism is heard and embraced by all Catholics and members of society. We must also study, understand, and address white privilege in order to promote racial reconciliation and solidarity.

Workshops were also held in order to promote dialogue among the myriad participants. Fr. Dan Groody, CSC, Associate Professor of Theology at Notre Dame, Ronaldo Cruz of Pax Christi USA and the three keynote speakers facilitated lively and productive conversations. Participants were clearly eager to draw on their own wealth of knowledge and experience to discuss the problem of racism in the Church and broader society. One could almost sense that they had waited far too long for this opportunity to speak and listen. We can only hope that other dioceses will replicate this kind of dialogue with their members in the near future.

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