

Social justice homily 101 from a layman

Jerry Filteau | Sep. 25, 2009 NCR Today



On the first day of the Sept. 24-26 Catholic Charities USA 2009 Annual Gathering, one of the

most inspired and inspirational commentaries on Catholic social justice themes came not from one of the convention's major featured speakers, but from a local lay Catholic Charities leader on a group panel — Michael Reichert, president of the Seattle Archdiocese's Catholic Charities office, Catholic Community Services of Western Washington.

What he said basically was that Catholic Charities personnel ought to realize they speak for disenfranchised people they know through personal experience. The humility that marks their service to those people in the church should not interfere with or limit the strength of their public advocacy for them, he said.

His unexpected spiritual invitation to a deeper level of thought came in the midst of a four-person panel discussion on how Catholic Charities agencies around the country relate to public policy and funding issues relating to poverty, including how they interact with state legislatures — a key issue in both advocacy and reception and use of funds.

Reichert said he, like others on the panel, was concerned about the effects on Catholic Charities budgets by state legislatures, governors and budget cuts in state funds, "but frankly I don't think that's where the point is."

"The point is that we know our people. We know whom we serve. We know their needs. We know their methods of choice," he said. "But more than anything else, if I can leave an impression upon this conversation, it's that we have a unique role as advocates of the poor."

Catholic Charities people in the Pacific Northwest where he serves, he said, are often noted in the media for their personal and professional humility — "we're most often congratulated in [area] newspapers on how wonderfully humble our people are, how caring we are, how friendly we are."

But that very humility, however laudatory it might be as a Christian virtue, can turn into an enemy of effective advocacy for the poor, he said.

"We are humble, but we must turn that humility into power," he said. "Whether or not we are financially smart, at some point we must become more powerful advocates for the poor."

Reichert suggested that social justice advocates adopt St. John the Baptist, who spoke "loud and clear" for social change, as their patron saint.

"We know our people, and so we're the ones best able to speak for them," he said. "We have to accept that as

part of the cross which we must accept on behalf of the poor.?

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Jerry Filteau, NCR Washington correspondent, is in Portland covering the CCUSA national gathering Sept. 24-26. He will be providing further reports on the meeting online in coming days and in NCR's next print edition.

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