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'Together is better!'

Catherine M. Odell | May. 12, 2010

Mass is celebrated for participants in the Catholic Cultural Diversity Network Convocation at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart on the campus of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana May 7. (CNS/Matt Cashore, University of Notre Dame)

NOTRE DAME, IND. -- ?We are a historic church. Some of that history isn?t pretty, but we believe God will guide us to where he wants us to be,? began Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, Calif.

Soto, chairman of the U.S. bishop?s Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, set the tone for the Catholic Cultural Diversity Network Convocation sponsored by the bishops' conference at the University of Notre Dame May 6-8. The U.S. bishops wanted participants to share their histories, but also wanted them to talk and pray about the future of an increasingly diverse American Catholic church.

The bishops' conference has made the recognition of cultural diversity in the church one of its five priorities. Nineteen bishops were among the hand-picked group of 305 church leaders at the convocation. Apostolic Nuncio to the United States Archbishop Pietro Sambi conveyed a blessing and words of encouragement from Pope Benedict XVI.

Convocation participants -- priests, religious and lay people -- came from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and represented a broad cross-section of Catholic organizations and ministries. They first shared experiences in small "family groups," with each family representing different ethnicity: African American, Asian and Pacific Islander, European American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American and Migrants, Refugees and Travelers.

In these groups, there were echoes of Soto?s allusion to pain as the "families" told of struggling to find their place and identity in the church.

"We're still foreigners even if we've been part of this society forever," commented Missionary of St. Joseph Fr. Michael Montoya, executive director of the U.S. Catholic Mission Association. Montoya, a youngish Asian-American with a Filipino heritage and a doctorate in ministry, said he is always amused when Catholics, especially those with a European background, ask, " 'Where are you from?' I say 'Washington, D.C.' Then, they say, 'No really . . . where are you from?' "

Fr. Henry Sands, administrator of St. Alfred Parish in Taylor, Mich., was a spokesman for the Native American family at the large groups meetings. Sands confessed that the challenges for Native American Catholics are daunting.

?We see it as a challenge just to be visible and to be seen as equals in the Church,? he told the convocation. Native Americans represent less than 1 percent of the U.S. population but approximately 20 percent of the members of this ethnic ?family? call themselves Catholic. On the other hand, he admitted, challenges can also be seen as opportunities. The lack of priests serving in the areas where Native Americans live could help foster lay leadership, the priest said.

Hispanic Catholics, on the other hand, spoke about a different reality. Their ethnic family is the fastest growing family in the United States. Hispanics and Latinos constitute about 15 percent of the population in the United States, and the 2010? U.S. Census projects this proportion to reach 25 percent by 2025. A third of all Catholics in the United States are Hispanic.

Armando Cervantes, of Orange, Calif., said that Hispanic Catholic leaders are particularly concerned about the formation of youth. The Hispanic community, he said, has suffered greatly from continuing racism and racial profiling. The loss of language, culture and heritage have also wounded the sense of identity and Hispanic pride.

Facilitating the sharing of stories about their experiences as Catholics in the United States was a centerpiece of the convocation, according to Jesuit Fr. Allan Deck, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church. "We focused on the story coming out of the lives of the people themselves. This was a different model. This model of inter-cultural encounter seemed to help us get to a basic level of trust from which we can continue to dialogue about issues that are difficult and delicate -- especially about the relationships between different groups in the church."

"I have the church! I have seen unity in diversity," observed an enthused Auxiliary Bishop Rutilio Del Riego of San Bernardo, Calif. during a panel discussion on the second evening. "Together is better!" agreed Bishop Martin D. Holley of Washington, D.C., referring to the gathering for which many wore colorful native dress. "Pray that the Holy Spirit will help us find solutions."

Deck said that the convocation wasn't about promoting diversity for its own sake. ?The rising leaders of non-European origin in the Church -- together with the European-American leaders -- began to realize that the Catholic faith is the vehicle by which they engage America," Deck said. "For us, as Catholics, it?s not merely about diversity, about being politically correct. It?s about diversity in connection with faith and Catholic identity. That?s intrinsically Catholic! That?s our American experience. Catholics are a Eucharistic people; everyone is welcomed to the table.?

Participants took home copies of new guidelines to help promote cultural competence for people in ministry. They were asked to provide feedback on the guidelines to the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church.

?Cultural competence,? Deck said is ?understanding the gift of cultural diversity.? Because people of non-European descent constitute the majority of U.S. Catholics, cultural competence is indispensable, he added. Church ministers must understand cultural differences when they work in marriage preparation, or faith formation in schools, the promotion of vocations, and of course, in the promotion of social justice and dignity.

Before disbanding, convocation participants sent an open letter to the bishops of Arizona expressing solidarity with the Catholic community opposed to Arizona Law SB1070. The Arizona law authorizes the profiling of minorities and was passed to identify, prosecute and deport illegal immigrants.

Deck explained that the event at Notre Dame had initially been planned to mark the tenth anniversary of Encuentro 2000. That event was held in Los Angeles in July, 2000 as a Jubilee Year celebration and drew 3000 participants. Earlier "encuentros" (Spanish for "encounters") were held primarily for Hispanic Catholics. But, as discussions for the 2010 event moved forward, a much smaller and carefully crafted convocation was scheduled.

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