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Bourgeois: 'Our Movement is Strong'

James Roberts | Nov. 22, 2008

Fort Benning, Georgia
Stroll the halls of the Columbus convention center during the first night of events at the Ignatian Solidarity Network's Family Teach-In, and you could easily think you'd wandered into the first day of freshman orientation. Students, sporting sweatshirts that trumpet high schools, prep schools, colleges and universities from across the country wander in small groups. Some spot friends they'd met, a year ago, at this same event. Others walk slowly, taking in the booths and tables that offer any myriad causes to support.

As the day's events begin, the crowd files into a large hall. The Convention Center is Columbus' historic Iron Works building, built in 1853. It backs up to the Chattahoochee river, and the pines that lurch from the far bank towards the roof of the place give it the appearance from outside of a smaller building than it is. Inside the hall where students, their parents, veterans of the peace and social justice movement, and others gather the ceilings are high and dark. Giant gears hang over the room, remnants of the building's original purpose. Tall, thick wooden beams plunge from the ceiling towards the ground and anchor the room that's filled to capacity and then some.

The same excitement and energy I felt two years ago was present tonight. Student and faculty delegations from across the Jesuit and Ignatian community sat together throughout the hall. As each speaker stepped to the podium, the very mention of a school in attendance drew cheers and hollers from their respective corners.

Ann Magovern, Executive Director of the Ignatian Solidarity Network, welcomed the crowd, thanked them for being a part of this year's event, and emphasized the crucial role each person in attendance can play in spreading the message of peace, social justice, and tolerance in their community.

Later, the crowd dispersed for the Teach-In's first round of "Break-Out" sessions. Covering a wide range of topics, from non-violent communication to self-care for the student activist, these sessions are a rare opportunity to learn organizing from those who practice it daily, and share experiences with a roomful of peers.

I led a class on environmentalism. I was warned when I agreed to lead it, that the topic drew large crowds last year. With a few minutes to go before I began tonight, the room arranged to seat around ninety people was full and a few stood in the doorway. Before starting, I sparked up a conversation with a row of kids who told me they had traveled from Creighton Prep School in Omaha.

"What is it you'd like to learn tonight?" I asked. A floppy haired 17 year old name Colin replied, "I like the environment, I'm here to find out what that means I should do." For my many friends who teach high school back home, I now appreciate what it is you mean when you talk about a room full of blank canvasses. The session was lively, full of interesting questions and excitement regarding the tremendous opportunities for change and betterment my generation sees in front of us. From the laughter and applause that spilled out of neighboring rooms, I got the feeling that sense of opportunity wasn't limited to environmentalism.

This is, I feel, one of the most interesting aspects of the weekend: How can an event, which began as an effort to

never forget the acts of violence and atrocity carried out on 6 Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, her teenage daughter and tens of thousands more who perished as a result of the S.O.A.'s teaching, now seem to offer...well, so much hope and excitement? I asked several people I met.

"I'm here because I see this as my chance to play a role in taking action not just against the School of the Americas and its practices, but in support of so many issues," said Cathryn Mulhvihill, a Sophomore at Valley Christian High School in San Jose, California. "I think it's awesome, that this started with a group of old people, and now, we've joined them - it's us, students and kids."
Others saw the excitement present in the room as little more than the manifestation of the social justice tradition.

"Everything can't be doom and gloom," said Jim Keady, "we have to be aware that it does exist, but recognize the power to change. That's the challenge of trying to live the Gospel, it sometimes offers us a paradoxical moment in which we have to celebrate suffering, in the struggle for justice." Keady, a former collegiate soccer player, is the Diector of 'Educating for Justice', a non-profit based out of Asbury Park, New Jersey. He also organizes the campaign "Team Sweat", which works to educate investors, businesses and consumers about the injustice of sweatshops across the globe and is working to force sports apparel giant Nike to discontinue its use of sweatshop labor.

The same sentiment echoed from others who worked for organizations fighting for social justice. "We're here. We're not talking about it anymore," said Devon Davey of 'Not for Sale', an organization working to stop human trafficking and forced slavery. Davey, a student at San Francisco University continued, "I see our generation as a real force for change."

It's no coincidence, I guess, that change is what everyone is talking about. Only a few weeks removed from a national election in the U.S. that centered around a call for change, the hall was full of people primed to take President-Elect Obama up on his offer. In fact the very mention of the newly elected president elicited rousing applause among the evening's crowd. A stark contrast from my trip two years ago, in which most of the materials being sold or passed out admonished the Bush administration. It may be a stretch to say this crowd feels they have an ally in the White House - as the S.O.A. remains open and the U.S. military budget continues to swell - but perhaps it feels it has the ear of a leader willing to listen.

The event's clear leader, however, took the stage a little before 7:30pm. As Fr. Roy Bourgeois walked on stage, he was greeted by a standing ovation and thunderous applause, he stopped, retreated and doing a bit of a two step, seemed to revel in the support of the capacity crowd. Support has been difficult to come by recently, for Fr. Bourgeois.

It was only a month ago that he received word from the Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith that his attendance at the **ordination of a woman in August[1]** of this year now has him facing excommunication if he fails to recant his support for the event.

He was given 30 days to do so. The thirtieth day drew to an end as Bourgeois took leaned into the microphone. A priest and activist for 36 years, he didn't hide from the warning that loomed. "For eighteen years, I have spoken out against the injustices of the S.O.A. For the last several years, I have spoken out against the injustices of the war in Iraq." he said, his slight drawl apparent in the silent room. The packed hall collectively scooted to the edge of their seats. "And now, I can no longer, in my good conscience, remain silent regarding the injustice being done in our own church. And the exclusion of women from the priesthood, is a grave injustice." Before the crowd could react, he finished, "After much prayer and deliberation, I can not recant. Thank you." He turned, and walked from the stage, as members of the hall's crowd broke rank to meet him and show their support.

Perhaps that's why the excitement is so palpable here. Perhaps that's why a new generation of young Catholic

activists seems poised to work for change. In a time of half-billion dollar campaigns and bumper sticker slogans, this event's leader promises merely to continue to be an example of justice and service, for all those who gather.

To learn more about the organizations mentioned above, visit:

www.notforsalecampaign.org and,
www.educatingforjustice.org

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