NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Poverty fight called 'out of fashion,' but Catholics urged to persist

Beth Griffin Catholic News Service | Oct. 24, 2011

JAMAICA, N.Y. -- Catholics have a responsibility to impel business, government and civil society to eradicate poverty by adopting policies that respect human dignity, promote the common good, protect human rights and address systemic ills, said speakers at an Oct. 22 program at St. John's University.

The conference on "Poverty Eradication and Intergenerational Justice: Stewardship, Solidarity and Subsidiarity" drew about 300 people and was sponsored by the university's Vincentian Center for Church and Society.

"Eradicating poverty has gone out of fashion" as politicians appeal to the broader middle class, said Michael A. Benjamin, who represented portions of the Bronx in the New York State Assembly from 2003 to 2010. It's easy to focus time and programs on photogenic children, he said, but the reality is "there is no child living in poverty without an adult."

"When Jesus said the poor would always be with us, he didn't mean to let them languish in poverty," Benjamin said. Welfare should be used as a bridge to employment and government money spent on job-training programs will prepare people for private-sector employment, he said.

He urged conference participants to become advocates, take charge of government, become agents of change and be a moral compass wherever their careers take them.

Scott J. Budde is managing director of TIAA-CREF (Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association -- College Retirement Equities Fund), which manages retirement accounts for people who work in higher education and nonprofit organizations. He said individuals and groups can practice socially responsible investing and work to change corporate behavior that does not promote the common good.

Budde said individuals can sue, protest or boycott as a noninvesting strategy to effect change. He said those who hold investments can engage in social screening, which uses social or environmental criteria to pick stocks and bonds for a portfolio.

They can also make proactive investments in companies that contribute to their communities, he said. As shareholders, they can use their proxy votes to urge corporate leaders to adopt practices that respect human rights and protect the natural world.

Joan Rosenhauer, executive vice president of U.S. operations at Catholic Relief Services, said civil society refers to those engaged in "uncoerced collective action around shared interests."

Civil society agencies, such as CRS and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, create opportunities for participation and help shape what governments and markets do, she said.

Development aid is not much of a priority in the halls of Congress or in the private markets now, but through advocacy, civil society can call attention to the need and help shape the type of development that is done,

Rosenhauer said.

As an example, she said there is a conflict between effectiveness and efficiency in Haiti, where CRS works. "It would be more efficient for us to rebuild there, but it is more effective to help Haitians develop their own ability" to do so, she said.

Speakers said the current "Occupy" movement gives voice and an opportunity to participate to those who feel they are not heard. Benjamin said those leading Occupy Wall Street in New York are wisely keeping their message simple and targeted. Budde said the movement will eventually need to create policy to be effective.

Daniel Finn gave the keynote address on "The Values, Virtues and Principles for a Just and Sustainable Future." Finn is professor of moral theology and holds the William E. and Virginia Clemens chair in economics and the liberal arts at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn.

"The Catholic view of morality is not a constraint on freedom but a condition for human flourishing," Finn said. Catholic social thought "does not give us nice, neat answers" but proposes justice, solidarity, subsidiarity, sustainability and participation, he added.

He said the economic goal is not wealth, but prosperity that helps the entire community to flourish. "Business must serve work and business owners have an obligation, as part of the larger system of God's intention, to support the overall expansion of work in society," Finn said.

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