

Building community at heart of lay ministry, conference speakers say

Daniel Linskey | Jun. 6, 2012

ARLINGTON, Va. -- The head of Catholic Relief Services urged an audience of lay ministers to work with one another and develop a sense of community.

And one key to building that community is charisma, said Carolyn Woo, CEO of Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency.

"Charisma is the ability to take people as you find them, like them for what they are, and do not dislike them for what they are not," she told attendees at the annual conference of the National Association for Lay Ministry.

The meeting, which featured prayer, speakers and informational booths, was held in the Crystal City area of Arlington May 31-June 2.

Woo urged empathy and a capacity for others. "This capacity for others is grace," she said, emphasizing that the word "grace" should be spelled with a capital "G" -- "because grace is what God gave us."

Grace, she continued, is the key to having the empathy that keeps lay ministers from competing with one another and instead builds a community of lay ministers.

Woo also stressed the importance of community and social justice in lay ministry, saying CRS is one of the largest and most successful organizations to follow that mission. "We attend to physical, mental and spiritual needs of the people we serve," she said.

CRS is able to commit 94 percent of its funding to projects, a level of commitment unattainable by most charities, according to Woo.

"Not only do we serve the common good, but we serve with uncommon excellence," she added. CRS is able to achieve such success because its work is leveraged by the global church.

Woo told the audience, "50 percent to 60 percent of our workers are Catholic."

Key to the success of this global network is community. In building this sense of community, on both a local and global scale, Woo warned of the dangers of unnecessary competition. "We are so used to the zero-sum mentality of scarcity, when another's success means we lose." That is not an approach lay ministers can take, she argued.

Another speaker, Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, spoke about the relationship between clergy and lay ministry, noting the great strides lay ecclesiastical ministry has made.

"Since the first study of lay ministry formation in 1985-86, the number of programs has increased by more than 50 percent and the number of participants has grown more than threefold," he said.

Bishop Wester acknowledged, however, the difficulties facing lay ministry, including financial challenges for dioceses; lack of job security for lay ministers; massive shifts in society concerning gender roles, family and marriage; tensions between laity and clergy; and the general decline in participation in the sacraments and Mass attendance.

However, to combat such difficulties, Bishop Wester reminded the audience, "We all share the same baptismal values. Each baptized Catholic is intimately one with Christ, and shares in that intimacy between Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

Echoing Woo's remarks, he said, "We do not compete with one another in the current use of the word but in the original use of it. It comes from 'competere' and means to 'seek with.' Together, in the Spirit, we seek to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, further the mission of the church and help to bring about the fullness of the kingdom."

"Each baptized person, living in the spirit of Jesus, is an instrument whom God has claimed for the working of direction of the world and its energies to the glory of God and the joy of God's friendship," he continued, "This sense of offering ourselves is a ministerial function."

Through baptism, lay ministers have the ability and need to work with the clergy, he said.

Bishop Wester reminded the audience, "Working with the realities of today are not ideal, but we all must accept that reality, and always with humility. ... This is an inclusive church, immigrants, those with disabilities, young and old, liberal and conservative, gay and straight, rich and poor: All are welcome."

In conclusion, the bishop said: "To live one's life as a response to God's call is a pilgrimage, a shared journey of faith, solidarity and transformation in the light of Christ -- the marks of a very different kind of quest. The marks, I would add, of lay ecclesial ministry."

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