

Speakers say church needs to see ministry, roles in new light

By Patricia Zapor, Catholic News Service, September 26, 2006

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- If the church hopes to respond to who its members are in the coming years, it will need to see itself in a new light, suggested participants in a conference on the Catholic Church in America.

The Sept. 20-21 conference hosted by The Catholic University of America's Life Cycle Institute brought together reports from sociologists and pollsters, speeches by a cardinal and a columnist and descriptions of newer and growing approaches to ministry, including Opus Dei, as well as outreach to Latinos and organizations such as Voice of the Faithful.

Sociologists Dean Hoge and Bill D'Antonio, both on the staff of the Life Cycle Institute, set the stage with data about the church's growth and about what Catholics say are the most important elements of being Catholic.

One recent Life Cycle Institute study of U.S. Catholics asked which of a dozen things that might define the church people consider to be "very important." At the top of the list, each with 84 percent responses, were "belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead" and "helping the poor," said Hoge. Next, at 76 percent, was "the sacraments, such as the Eucharist," followed by 74 percent who said "the Catholic Church's teaching about Mary as the mother of God."

Rated as very important by between 47 percent and 54 percent of respondents were: teachings about same-sex marriage, involvement in social justice, participation in devotions, and daily prayer life. The church's teaching against abortion was listed as very important by 44 percent and the Vatican's teaching authority named by 42 percent. Teachings about the death penalty and celibate male clergy were listed as very important by 35 percent and 29 percent, respectively, Hoge said.

Since 1987, the institute has polled Catholics four times on topics related to their beliefs and their ties to the church. D'Antonio extrapolated the data to look at how different age groups of adult Catholics see the church and at the depth of their commitment to it.

For example, he said, what he called "millennial" Catholics, or those who have come of age since 2000, are more likely to consider helping the poor as very important to their beliefs than are those who fall into the "pre-Vatican II," "Vatican II," or "post-Vatican II" generations. Between 82 percent and 84 percent of people in the other three categories said helping the poor was very important, while 91 percent of the millennial Catholics did so.

Sister Simone Campbell, a Sister of Social Service who is national coordinator of Network, a Catholic social justice lobby, said the sociological data show that some of what the church faces is "accommodating our own success," with well-educated, well-traveled, more engaged Catholics than the church had in the past. Robert Royal, president of the Faith and Reason Institute, questioned whether those well-educated Catholics are actually far less well-educated about the church itself.

In a second panel, speakers described what seems to draw people to organizations such as Voice of the Faithful and Opus Dei.

Frank Butler, president of Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, known as FADICA, said the increasing number of wealthy Catholics has created a niche for his organization in channeling people's philanthropic efforts.

"We are entering the golden age of Catholic philanthropy," he said. FADICA strives to help people consider both the moral challenges of wealth along with how that can affect the life of the church, he explained.

"It won't automatically translate to debt-free dioceses, new cathedrals or schools," he said. "Our imagination must reach beyond building cathedrals."

Russell Shaw, a writer and a member of Opus Dei, Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, national director of Communion and Liberation, and Mary Pat Fox, president of Voice of the Faithful, each described what draws people to their organizations.

Shaw and Msgr. Albacete told of the thirst for spiritual guidance that attracts people to Opus Dei, a personal prelature founded in 1928, and Communion and Liberation.

Shaw said that despite the harsh image presented recently about Opus Dei by the book and movie "The DaVinci Code," people join it because it's "a very rewarding way -- though certainly not the only way or a perfect way -- of trying to live as a serious Christian in the world."

Msgr. Albacete said the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation provides a way to share the experience of what it means to be a Christian.

Voice of the Faithful started in parishes in the Boston Archdiocese in reaction to news about the church's handling of sexual abuse by priests, but its mission extends well beyond its original intent, explained Fox.

Formed in 2002, the organization now has more than 25,000 members, she said. While its three main goals are to support victims of sexual abuse, to support "priests of integrity" and to shape structural change within the church, members see their role as "not to tear down the church but to build a new one," she said.

"To build the church into a healthy church must come from a place of love," Fox said. "We see value in changing it so it will be there for the next generation."

Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, associate director of the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, explained that the next generation of U.S. Catholics will come largely from Latin America. Hispanics have accounted for 71 percent of the growth in the U.S. church since 1960, and more than 50 percent of all U.S. Catholics under age 25 are of Hispanic descent, he said.

Aguilera-Titus said there are still problems such as unwelcoming parishes and resistance to Hispanics as leaders within the church.

"The challenge is to what extent the church is going to allow (its Hispanic segment) to thrive," he said.

The conference also included a keynote address by Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, and a closing talk by E.J. Dionne, Washington Post columnist and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, as well as a panel discussing the church's role in public policy and another on the changing dynamics of parish life.