

# Anti-racism training for Catholic leaders called historic step

WASHINGTON - In what one participant called "truly a moment of historical significance for the U.S. church," two dozen leaders of national Catholic organizations recently gathered outside Washington for two and a half days of training on how to recognize and dismantle institutional racism.

That assessment of the gathering came from Sister Anita Baird, director of the Office for Racial Justice in the Archdiocese of Chicago, a member of the Midwest Catholic Anti-Racism Network and a Daughter of the Heart of Mary.

"I believe it is the beginning of an anti-racist movement at the national level that will have a powerful impact upon the church and the communities of color who long for a place of total inclusion at the table that welcomes our gifts in a culture that is free of the sin of racism," Sister Anita said in a statement after the May 17-19 training, which was not announced to the media until June.

Funded by a grant from the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, the training drew representatives of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Campaign for Human Development, National Black Catholic Sisters' Conference, Mexican American Cultural Center, Catholic Network of Volunteer Service, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Catholic Relief Services, Tekakwitha Conference, Association of Black Catholic Administrators, National Asian Pacific Catholic Organization, National Catholic Council for Hispanic Ministry, Pax Christi USA and other groups.

The trainers were Chuck Ruehle and Anne Stewart of Crossroads Ministry, an interfaith and community-based anti-racism group based in Chicago.

Ronaldo Cruz, who retires July 1 as executive director of the USCCB Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs, told Catholic News Service that the training was especially valuable at a time when Hispanic ministry in the church is being buffeted by budget cutbacks and "the backlash of the immigration issue."

He said his own secretariat, which will be absorbed into a new Office for Cultural Diversity in the reorganization of the USCCB, has received some “nasty e-mails” since the immigration issue took center stage in Washington earlier this year.

“People have tended to be much more bold about expressing intolerance,” he said, adding that some seem to have forgotten that “the only passport required in the church is your baptism” and that the church “has to serve all who come.”

“This national training gave me hope,” Cruz said. “The potential is great for a collaborative effort among the participating church leaders and organizations to respond to the injustice and pain of racism. True community cannot exist without confronting this sin.”

The training included an intensive look at the history of racism through national and international historical events, court decisions, legislation and social movements. The participants then reflected on how far the church has come in such areas as its personnel, programs, membership, organizational structure and identity.

Looking at a six-point “continuum on becoming an anti-racist multicultural institution,” Cruz said he believed many church structures were currently at the third point of “symbolic change.” Institutions at that point in the continuum make “official policy pronouncements on multicultural diversity” and see themselves as having “open doors to people of color,” but make “little or no contextual change in culture, policies and decision-making.”

Dave Robinson, executive director of Pax Christi USA, a primary sponsor of the program, said in a statement that the training came at a key moment in U.S. church history, when some diocesan offices were being “blended” into others or were working with diminished resources.

“While the church is making greater efforts to celebrate the richness of its growing multicultural diversity, one of the biggest challenges continues to be the issue of racism,” Robinson said.

“As peacemakers and followers of Christ we must be at the forefront of the struggle to purge our church of any and all racist structures,” he added.

Cruz said participants in the training planned to form a task force that would continue “teaching, learning, reflecting on what is possible, what needs to be done differently and learning how to be one in Christ.”