

Catholic Charities delegates discuss poverty, racism

CINCINNATI - Singing "This Little Light of Mine" and walking across a Civil War-era suspension bridge from Covington, Ky., to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati Sept. 15, about 500 participants at the annual Catholic Charities USA convention demonstrated their desire to lead the way out of poverty and racism.

Echoing the convention theme, "Crossing the Rivers of Freedom," the marchers followed in the footsteps of numerous former slaves making their way to freedom. The final destination for the delegates, the Freedom Center, was named for the part the Ohio River Valley played as a stop along the underground railroad.

"This is a wonderful way to end a day of discussion about the role racism plays in our society," said Shelley Borysiewicz, spokeswoman for Catholic Charities USA.

Earlier in the day, Father Bryan Massingale, a Marquette University theology professor, and Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M., led discussions focused on the Catholic Charities 2006 briefing paper, "Poverty and Racism: Overlapping Threats to the Common Good."

Calling racism "the root of many evils," including poverty, Bishop Ramirez said it "is so deeply entrenched in our American ethos, that it will take an extraordinary and superhuman effort to dislodge it, to eradicate it, for its taproot reaches deep down into the soul of our society."

He urged attention to the "new victims of racial, ethnic and cultural bias," including "the new pariah in our country," undocumented immigrants.

"There is only one word to describe the present-day rhetoric and local legislation directed against immigrants around the country, and that is meanness," he said.

Bishop Ramirez praised Catholic Charities USA and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development for their work against poverty and racism, and said the U.S.

bishops have been speaking out against racism as individuals and collectively since the late 1950s.

But, he added, "I suspect that 50 years from now we will still be calling for the elimination of this insidious sin. I hope that at least we will be able to point to progress we may have made by that time."

Borysiewicz said the discussion at the convention - along with "actually crossing the bridge and coming up to a prayer service at the Freedom Center - I think, provides a thought-provoking visual experience of people seeking freedom" from poverty and racism.

The Sept. 13-16 convention was co-hosted by Catholic Social Services of Southwestern Ohio, Catholic Social Services of Miami Valley and Catholic Social Services of Northern Kentucky.

During the opening session Sept. 14, Catholic Charities USA officials presented the 2007 Vision Award to Norman C. Francis, president of Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, in honor of his leadership in the city after Hurricane Katrina.

After the floods following Hurricane Katrina, Francis immediately went to work leading the recovery of the severely damaged Xavier campus. He also chaired the governor's Louisiana Recovery Authority, managing the recovery effort for the entire state.

"Our Vision Award is presented to those who, in their life and work, share Catholic Charities commitment to ensuring that the needs of individuals, families and communities - especially the poor and vulnerable - are front and center in conversations about the kind of society we want," said Father Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA.

"In the face of one of the most extraordinary crises this nation has ever experienced, Dr. Francis remained a voice of reason, possibility and hope," he added.

The university president said he was "honored and pleased" to accept the award.

Today, in the United States, he said, "we have to deal with catastrophes equitably,

honestly and with moral values. And I am happy to say Catholic Charities has established a principle and model for working together: We have to work together across lines - across race, across culture and across economic backgrounds.”