

Hundreds discuss racism, poverty at teach-in

NEW ORLEANS - More than 500 students from Jesuit colleges, universities and high schools gathered in New Orleans March 9-11 to discuss racism and poverty and engage in spring-break service work.

They were among the approximately 2,000 Jesuit-affiliated students who were to descend on New Orleans in a 10-day period to aid in the city's ongoing recovery efforts.

The teach-in, "Rebuilding Our Communities: Facing Racism and Poverty," featured discussions on institutional racism, economic development and poverty, environmental racism, fair housing and employment.

Sponsored by the Ignatian Solidarity Network in San Francisco and the New Orleans province of the Society of Jesus, the event also featured spiritual reflection and a March 11 Mass presided over by a personal representative of Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Jesuit superior general.

"Every victim has the power to walk ahead. The power is there," said Jesuit Father Fernando Franco in his homily. "Never make the mistake to think that you will give the power in this city. You have seen people who have suffered, but you have also seen people who walk."

Father Franco, director of the social justice secretariat at Jesuit headquarters in Rome, applauded the students for their efforts and for their desire to rebuild a more just city. "In the name of the Society of Jesus, I want to thank you," he said, "because I feel that you are living the charism of the Society of Jesus."

Students came from as far away as California and New York to take part in the teach-in. Several were reunited with Loyola New Orleans students whom they had hosted on their campuses in the fall of 2005, when Loyola was forced to shut down after Hurricane Katrina.

Drawing heavily on the U.S. bishops' 1979 statement on the sin of racism, "Brothers and Sisters To Us," moderators M. Shawn Copeland, a professor of theology at Boston College, and William Quigley, the director of the Gillis Long Poverty Law Center at Loyola New Orleans, defined racism as prejudice plus power.

They cited inequities in employment, education, housing and criminal justice as well as opposition to affirmative action as being tools of institutionalized racism.

Quigley likened justice to "spokes in a wheel" and exhorted students to re-educate themselves. "The education we receive by and large is an education to live in the status quo," he said.

Copeland told the students that their engagement in justice work is akin to resurrection. "Resurrection is an act of resistance," she said. "It's God's resistance to all that undermines and oppresses."

Her remarks echoed those of Jesuit Father Fred Kammer, the provincial of the New Orleans province.

"All that we do in justice and peace work follows the pattern of death and resurrection," said Father Kammer, a New Orleans native. He asked students to "see, judge, act," and to root their solidarity with others in "fidelity and hope."

Susan Haarman, a graduate of Marquette University in Milwaukee who is now on the campus ministry staff at Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia, said she had come "because when you read the Gospel it doesn't give me an option not to be here." She was part of the sixth group from Wheeling to make the approximately 1,000-mile trip to New Orleans in the last 18 months.

She said the school, which has a long-standing commitment to people living in poverty in Appalachia, also has adopted the recovery of New Orleans as one of its causes. "It's really caught fire here on campus," she said. "It really has."

Jamie Cousin, a freshman at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Ala., lost her family home to Katrina's floodwaters. She spent part of her senior year in an apartment with two older cousins so she could graduate from her New Orleans high school, Mount Carmel Academy.

The Cousin family moved back into their home in March 2006 after completely gutting and restoring it with the help of volunteers. The 18-year-old has since spent two weekends in Bayou La Batre, a tiny fishing community near Mobile, doing the same for other families.

She thanked the many volunteers at the teach-in for giving their time and energy, and she reminded them that every structure they worked on was someone's home.

"This is more than just walls," said Cousin, one of 173 Spring Hill students to lose their homes to Katrina. "This is my house."