

Poverty has become political issue, says Catholic Charities official

WASHINGTON – Poverty represents different things to different people.

“For us, it’s a moral issue,” said Candy Hill, senior vice president for social policy and government affairs at Catholic Charities USA.

But for others, poverty has become “a political issue – to be only identified with one political party or the other, when we could all be working together to fight poverty,” she said.

Ms. Hill made her remarks during a June 12 congressional forum on poverty that featured at least eight members of the House, who did more listening than talking.

“I’m more used to sitting in an audience listening to congresspersons,” not the other way around, said Imam Malik Mujahid of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, another speaker at the forum.

“The Lord hears the cry of the poor,” Ms. Hill said, adding that the phrase has taken on additional meaning as a Catholic liturgical song in addition to being part of Psalm 34. “But I would suggest that some of us here built double-paned windows, and we can’t hear the cry of the poor.”

Rather than engage in foreign military adventures to secure other nations’ borders, she added, “we need to secure our own nation.”

Because race plays such a factor in U.S. poverty, according to Ms. Hill, “we have to open up the conversation between racism and poverty if we’re really going to fight poverty. ... We need to have that tough conversation with people who don’t agree with us.”

Alluding to the subprime mortgage crisis buffeting many U.S. homeowners today, Ms. Hill said, “We had a housing crisis before we had a foreclosure crisis. ... No child in America should have to spend one night in a homeless shelter.”

Ms. Hill said that if people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps really was the solution to poverty “Catholic Charities USA would have been willing to buy 36.5 million sets of bootstraps, declared victory and moved on.”

Alexia Kelley, executive director of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, said solutions to poverty should be seen “as being based on both justice and charity.”

“The country’s very reason (for being) is based on supporting the common good,” Ms. Kelley said. This, she added, should be linked to the Catholic Church’s “preferential option for the poor.”

Noting the estimated 37 million U.S. poor, the 45 million Americans without health care, and a survey that suggests that 81 percent of Catholics believe health care to be a moral right, Ms. Kelley said those numbers “fly in the face of the common good and the preferential option for the poor.”

Rep. Emanuel Cleaver II, D-Mo., who moderated a question-and-answer session following the forum presentations, showed a photo he had brought from his congressional office. It was of his childhood home in Dallas.

“We had no electricity, no running water. Six of us lived in that house – my mother, my father, my three sisters and me,” said Rep. Cleaver, who is also an ordained Methodist minister. “It’s not that far from downtown Dallas. That house still stands today; I saw it back in August (2007). ... My daddy worked three jobs to buy us a house. Three jobs.”

Rep. Cleaver bristled at the suggestion that out-of-work Americans are unworthy of additional unemployment benefits.

“When I hear people say they don’t want to extend unemployment benefits because people would rather collect unemployment benefits than work, it almost makes me want to hit somebody with my (minister’s) cross,” he said.

House Majority Whip James Clyburn, D-S.C., noted that 2008 marked the 40th anniversary of the assassinations of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and presidential aspirant Sen. Robert Kennedy; their deaths came two months apart.

Making his own religious allusion, Rep. Clyburn said that especially after the Kennedy assassination “we literally lapsed into the wilderness” with regard to issues the two late leaders addressed. “This is the 40th year. I hope you get my point,” he said.