

'Disparity,' today's real poverty issue

Seventeen congregations and agencies sponsor 'Different Faces of Poverty' symposium at Mount St. Mary's.

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"I think we have to put aside talking about poverty — which sounds kind of shocking, right?" Sister of Social Service Simone Campbell said during her keynote address at The Different Faces of Poverty symposium Feb. 14 at Mount Saint Mary's College.

"I think what we need to talk about is 'disparity,'" continued the executive director of NETWORK, the national Catholic social justice lobby. "Because the real issue is: Do we have a culture of individualism 'getting as much as I can,' or is our culture about sharing what we have and making sure that everyone has enough?"

"So I believe that by talking about disparity — income disparity, wealth disparity, opportunity disparity — then we can indicate it's not about 'them' out there, but it's about 'us' together. Disparity means I'm some place in this equation; I'm not left out of it."

The 63-year-old attorney, who grew up in Long Beach and graduated from St. Anthony High School, said she was shocked to hear recently at congressional hearings that in 2007 the average income of Fortune 500 company CEOs was \$10.5 million, or 344 times the average pay of U.S. workers. And she was appalled to learn that the top 50 hedge-fund managers during that year averaged \$588 million, some 19,000 times the average income of U.S. employees.

Sister Campbell urged approximately 250 symposium participants first to be aware of hidden poverty in their midst, where elec-

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tronic Food Stamp cards have replaced the more visible bread lines of the Depression. She asked them to pray on a regular basis "to open ourselves to where we're being called and what's next in responding to the needs around us."

Moreover, Sister Campbell said it was crucial to follow the 2009 New Year's message of Pope Benedict XVI concerning economic development addressing poverty as being the best way to create world peace.

"Don't we need to change our culture that says it's about 'how much I have' to 'How are



INEQUALITY — Sister Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK, stresses that disparity of income, wealth and opportunity should be the focus of today's anti-poverty efforts.

we doing together?" she stressed. "How can we reduce the disparities in this society? How can we increase opportunities for everyone? How can I share what I have? And how can we as a nation create a common good that does create a more perfect union?"

"If we address our U.S. culture, if we address this issue of disparity, then I believe over the next few years we can make a difference," she said. "There's nothing like an economic crisis to get our attention. So I think this is a great opportunity for us, because we know we are in this together. And it can be a moment of change."

Bringing awareness

Seventeen religious congregations and agencies — including the Los Angeles Archdiocese's Office of Justice and Peace — sponsored the daylong Different Faces of Poverty conference. Workshops on the plight of Palestinian refugees, human trafficking, victims of war, water as a human right, the food crisis, women in prison, immigrants and the uninsured were held at Mount St. Mary's College's downtown Doheny campus.

The goal was to grasp the "big picture" of poverty in the world today and then to talk about opportunities for systemic change. "I think it's a good idea just to network with other people about how we can come together and bring awareness to others who are still in the darkness about poverty," Sister of Social Service Gail Young, program coordinator of the Office of Justice and Peace, told The Tidings.

In her workshop "Loving our Neighbor: The Immigrant," Amalia Molina told how she and her husband from El Salvador were locked up in a Southland detention center for 16 months while fighting for asylum — at the same

time their three children struggled living alone.

Three other immigrants — a young woman from Chile now going to community college, a middle-aged physician from El Salvador barred from practicing medicine in this country, and a 12-year-old student at Dolores Mission School in Los Angeles — also shared what it was like being an undocumented immigrant in California today.

"Put yourself in our shoes," Molina, who now works in the archdiocese's Office of Restorative Justice, helping families with relatives being detained, pleaded. "Would you cross illegally because your family is asking for food and your children are crying? Would you cross the river? What would you do? And what are you doing now that you have heard the cry of neighbors?"

'Shifting and sharing'

Two Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, eating their lunch outside on a bench, were both impressed by the keynote speaker's emphasis on the idea of inequality.

"I loved it when Sister Simone talked about the disparity in our society," Sister Joan Henehand said. "It's so much more important that we focus on that than just look at the negative. It's a matter for those who have more of shifting and sharing."

Sister Cecile Beresford was nodding. She agreed the economic crisis was an opportunity to really address poverty head-on:



DETAINED — In her workshop on immigrants, Amalia Molina shares her story of being locked up in a local detention center for 16 months before gaining asylum.

"Sister spoke about dark and light, and how she thought we were entering into a period of light where we could do something about all this.

I appreciated that a lot."

Between bites, Sister Henehan added, "And I think, too, a lot of people are seeing themselves deprived of some things now that will help them understand a little bit better the plight of those who are poorer even than we are."

Another Sister of Social Service, Diane Donoghue, who in 1989 formed the Esperanza Community Housing Corporation, an affordable Los Angeles housing developer, was proud that so many local religious congregations were involved in putting on the Different Faces of Poverty symposium.

"This is who we are today," she declared. "We're informed people advocating for the disenfranchised of our society. As women religious we do that because we work with those on the margins, and we absolutely want people to come in from those margins."

"And for that reason — to empower them — we will step back, but we won't step down." she said. ❖