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Catalyst for Social Justice

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Catalyst for Social Justice

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Tuesday March 29, 2022

By Eric F. Spina

(This op-ed by Eric F. Spina appeared in the Dayton Daily News on March 29, 2022.)

Brother Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., is the Dayton region's consummate servant-leader, who didn't step away when he stepped down as the University of Dayton's president 20 years ago.

He awakes every morning with a passion for his life's work — bringing people together from our campus and our city to imagine and create a future of greater economic and racial justice for Dayton's children and families.

It's a tall bill, and he's devoted more than 50 years to this effort. For him, it's a calling. As a religious brother, he sees the face of God in everyone he meets and values the dignity and gifts of all people.

On April 1, the University of Dayton will honor him with our highest award, an honorary doctoral degree in humanities for being a catalyst for social justice in our community. Fittingly, he will receive this honor during UD's April 1-3 "The Common Good in a Divided City" conference that will focus on building regional solidarity.

This a richly deserved tribute for UD's longest-serving president and beloved community leader who has put Catholic social teaching and the Marianist philosophy into action over a long time and on a large scale. I can think of no one who deserves this honor more.

In the 1990s, after the deaths of five children in Dayton's child welfare system, he co-chaired a highly publicized community task force devoted to making sure vulnerable children did not fall through the cracks. Later, along with community leaders, he served as a leading force behind the Genesis Project, which led to the revitalization of the Fairgrounds neighborhood between UD and Miami Valley Hospital and the extraordinary transformation of Brown Street. Just recently, he co-chaired the Community Oversight Committee that dispersed millions of dollars in donations to the families of the victims and those injured in the 2019 mass shooting in the Oregon District. In between, he helped shepherd two human services levies to victory.

Brother Ray is a humble, faith-filled leader who excels at inviting people with different perspectives to gather around the table to find common ground. With an engineer's analytical mind and a humanitarian's heart, he works with others to tackle big issues — child protection, urban education reform and neighborhood development.

Through Brother Ray's deep belief and understanding of Catholic social teaching and social justice, he takes the core tenet of Catholicism and applies it to all that he does, including challenging the Catholic church to take a stronger public voice on what he calls "the silent violence of poverty" in our city and nation's urban core. In his "Leadership in Communities" seminar, he teaches students ways to help neighborhoods inventory their assets and develop a collective vision for revitalization.

In a recent conversation, he told me, "We're not going to be able to build communities that are just and peaceful if people aren't willing to serve."

Brother Ray is a remarkable servant-leader, in word and deed.

— Eric F. Spina, president of the University of Dayton

(The April 1-3 Common Good in a Divided City Conference is part of a weeklong series of events promoting work to address historic injustices. Participants are encouraged to continue the conversation April 7-8 at the Imagining Community: Shaping a More Equitable Dayton Symposium at the Hub Powered by PNC at the Dayton Arcade. Both are free and open to the public.)

