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Exclusion Theology

05.24.2011 | Catholic Exclusion of people from the Catholic church — by race, gender or nationality — is not just a question of morality, but is a fundamental theological question that goes to the church's identity.

That was a common theme that emerged May 18-22 at the University of Dayton during the fifth annual conference of the Ecclesiological Investigations Research Network, said Dennis Doyle, professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton and conference organizer.

"A frequent topic was that exclusion is not just a moral issue, it has to do with the very nature and mission of the church," Doyle said. "I think many people came away convinced that as theologians, we need to be talking about this and it needs to be central to the work we do."

In a discussion of her new book, *Women & Catholicism*, noted author Phyllis Zagano, said "Exclusion is the result of a defective view of God."

"I am for the non-exclusionary view of women as fully human persons," she said. "What is it about women that not only excludes us from ministry but also excludes us from the governance of the church?"

"If the church is willing to stand up...it will make a statement that will echo around the world," said Zagano, who holds a research appointment at Hofstra University.

The Catholic church has been complicit in supporting injustice, according to the Rev. Bryan Massingale, associate professor of theology at Marquette University, who spoke during a discussion of exclusion and racial justice.

Massingale, author of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, traced some of the ways the church exhibits a preference for the beliefs and practices of white, European-based culture, often regarding those practices as the standard or the norm of Catholicism.

"In U.S. and global Catholicism, God can speak unambiguously only in white," he said, adding that there is a "pervasive belief that only European beliefs and cultural practices can carry the divine."

"Can the church really be the body of Christ if it believes that the holy can be expressed only through white or European cultural products?" he asked.

That is a theological question, Massingale said, which has implications for the very identity of the church.

During a panel on exclusion and migration, Mark Ensalcaco, director of human rights studies at the University of Dayton, said the immigration issue is a moral crisis and raises fundamental questions about the role of the church.

"The immigration debate is all about exclusion," he said. "Who will (the U.S.) allow to be here? Church social teaching compels it to repel the thought of exclusion."

Ensalcaco said the Catholic church's position emphasizes all persons have the right of dignity in their own country and the right to migrate if they can't find dignity and basic human rights where they live. Nations can govern their own borders, but the church encourages nations not to incarcerate asylum seekers or enact punitive laws against immigrants.

"What the church is asking for far exceeds international human rights law," Ensalcaco said.

But the church can do more, Ensalcaco added. The church's timidity toward pressing the U.S. government on immigration reform may be part of the reason that reform "failed miserably."

"The church failed to convey the message. It needs to find a way to communicate its message on immigration to the average American," Ensalcaco said.

Dennis Doyle at dennis.doyle@notes.udayton.edu