

Discussion focuses on healing a broken Church and nation

Polarization in the United States has increased dramatically in recent decades. At a Georgetown University event on polarization in a “broken Church and nation,” John Carr, the director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, described the grim landscape of American politics. He argued that Americans are more divided than united and that fear, cynicism and anger are leading to tribalism, resulting in the nation’s capital failing to do even basic tasks like fund the government. This division has created fault lines that run through the Church, not just the government and culture. Many Catholics feel “politically homeless,” while others have become polarized, mirroring the values and behavior of others in their political party.

The event featured four panelists who brought unique perspectives and insights on polarization and its impact.

Finding neighbors

John Gehring, the Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, began the panel by doubling down on the grave nature of the status quo, particularly as our polarized Church deals with the fallout of another sexual abuse crisis. He stated that there is a crisis and that the situation is dire. We face the danger that then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio warned about on the eve of his election as pope: of turning inward, rather than going to peripheries to find wounded souls.

But there is a better way forward. Gehring said that now is the time to reclaim Catholic social teaching. He noted that we are a “both/and” Church that has the resources and worldview to transcend some of the deep divisions in American society. He urged a revival of the consistent ethic of life, an

approach that challenges the reigning ideologies on the right and left in the U.S.

Gehring offered practical steps. He said people on opposite sides of the political spectrum should not question each other's personal faith or commitment to the Church, even when challenging a fellow Catholic's public positions on important matters.

Elise Italiano, the founding executive director of The GIVEN Institute, also pointed to the value of the consistent life ethic and the importance of fully embracing Catholic social teaching. She noted that many young Catholics are showing a commitment to this approach in their activism, prayer life and on social media. However, Italiano pointed to high rates of stress, isolation and depression that millennials face. Many young leaders do not know to whom they should turn for advice or to emulate in their search for the best way forward. She closed by saying we can help each other and live as real neighbors, even if we disagree on certain matters.

The marginalized

Gloria Purvis, host of the EWTN radio show Morning Glory and editor of the African American Catholic Youth Bible, noted her disappointment that some of the conservatives around her failed to take the U.S. bishops' recent pastoral letter on racism seriously. Likewise, she expressed disappointment that some of her fellow pro-lifers have responded to police brutality with seeming indifference to the extrajudicial killing of black people. Purvis argued that our belief in the dignity of the person and sanctity of life must lead to more consistency, and that a more holistic approach to those inside and outside the womb can reduce polarization.

Hosffman Ospino, associate professor of Hispanic ministry and religious education at Boston College, argued that in order to overcome polarization, the Church must come to terms with its

own growing diversity and see it as a gift, not an illness. He pointed to the slow response in increasing the number of Latinos in Catholic schools and seminaries, Masses in Spanish, and leadership opportunities for Latinos in the Church.

Ospino echoed Pope Francis' call for a Church that goes out, not one that retreats. This requires recognizing that racism and classism are real. It means seeing that people are deeply impacted by harmful governmental policies. He pointed to the impact of family separations, the politicization of the caravan, and the demonization used to gin up support for the construction of a border wall. Without addressing growing anti-Latino sentiments, polarization will only grow stronger.

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