

WORLD & NATION

Theologian condemns 'blasphemy' of racism

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Racism is a "demonic evil" that continues to pervade U.S. society and the U.S. church, African-American theologian Diana L. Hayes said at a workshop on "Undoing Racism" Feb. 7.

Racism is "the lie that there is some inherent difference between people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds which renders one group superior to another," Hayes said.

"It is not only a lie, it is for all Christians a blasphemy. Such attestations of difference fly in the face of almighty God," she said.

Hayes, an associate professor of theology at Georgetown University, gave the keynote address at the opening session of the two-day workshop, which took place during Black History Month.

It was sponsored by Washington Theological Union in cooperation with the Task Force on Racism of the Council of Churches of Greater Washington.

In the main talk Feb. 8, Holy Ghost Father Anthony J. Gittins contrasted the "lie at the heart of every culture" with the message of the Gospel.

The lie, he said, is every culture's tendency to stratify and exclude, to separate its members into insiders and outsiders, haves and have-nots.

"Jesus came to expose the lie" by ministering to and raising up the powerless, those who were crippled or sick or possessed, those who were criminals, prostitutes and sinners, he said.

Hayes cited Jesus' own life as a challenge to those who would stereotype and dehumanize others. "He was poor, rejected and hungry. He was a criminal in the eyes of many," she said.

Hayes said that as a 50-year-old black woman she confronts the triple evils of

"racism, sexism and classism" on a daily basis.

It comes in the form of people entering Georgetown's theology offices and assuming she's a secretary or a cleaning woman, she said. Or people expressing surprise at her love of books. Or people "assuming I'm lost when I enter a conference room or when they see me up on a speaker's platform."

Racism "is a part of the warp and woof of our society," she said. "If anything, racism is even more dangerous today because it is less open. It is covert rather than overt. It is the death of a thousand small cuts instead of a knife in the back of the heart."

Hayes said she would like to have a T-shirt made proclaiming, "Difference is not dangerous — it is divine" because the diversity in humanity is a gift from God.

"We have to recognize and love those differences," she said. "We are called Christians because we are followers of Christ. Yet all too often we stray from the path of Christ into the pit of sin, the ugly sin of racism. We refuse to love our brothers and sisters in Christ simply because of their racial, ethnic or other differences."

She described the consequence of racism as "the pain of seeing hopes destroyed, dreams unfulfilled, homes shattered, opportunity denied because a person is of a different race ... I have fought against this pain my entire life as I have watched my sisters give up their dreams and settle for something less in life, unable to withstand the constant battle."

"Racism is the anguish of powerlessness, the frustration of denial, the humiliation of rejection," she added. "It is an act or failure to act which denies the humanity of the other who is different. Quite simply put, it is a denial of Christian love."

She quoted from the U.S. bishops' 1979 pastoral letter on racism, "Brothers and



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Quest for peace

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Pope John Paul II pose for photographers at the Vatican Feb. 3. In their first meeting the two privately discussed Middle East peace negotiations.

Sisters to Us": "Racism is a sin: a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family and violates the fundamental human dignity" of all those called to be children of the same creator God.

The basic way to undo racism, she said, is "profoundly simple, yet for that very reason so very difficult to accomplish."

It is "removing the blank mask from the face of the other whom we have relegated to the status of nonhuman for so long a time," she said.

Getting past stereotypes and learning to see "the human face of the other" de-

mands "a willingness to be open to metanoia, to conversion," she said.

At the parish level she said that overcoming racism in the church means a willingness to change by opening up parish life to the different histories, traditions and worship styles of minority members.

"We must be ready to get out of the way, if necessary, and allow new blood, which brings with it new ideas and understandings, new ways of being church," she said.

"This is very difficult for many of us to do. It is hard for us to accept," she said. "But it must be done."

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