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N.Y. Encounter sessions focus on 'Urge for Truth' amid pandemic, politics



Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, based in Montgomery, Ala., speaks June 14, 2018, during the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' annual spring assembly in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (Credit: CNS photo/Bob Roller)

It is typical for the annual New York Encounter weekend, sponsored by the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation, to consider matters of truth.

This year, however, the focus at the Feb. 18-20 event — with the theme “This Urge for the Truth” — addressed what occurs when what is supposed to be a shared reality is battered both by political divides and the COVID-19 pandemic.

And when it comes to addressing the pandemic, the idea that truth is merely a matter of individual interpretation has had fatal results, said Dr. Francis Collins, the now-retired director of the National Institutes of Health, who was recently named one of President Joe Biden’s science advisers.

“I never really dreamed that it would be this hard,” he told his audience Feb. 19 during a session titled “Can We Ever Know What is Real?” The was held in person and live streamed, like a majority of the Encounter sessions.

Collins knew someone who was unvaccinated, didn’t trust health officials and who later died of the virus.

“And that death did not need to happen,” he emphasized. He spoke incredulously of 150,000 pandemic deaths of unvaccinated people who died after vaccines became available: “Where people could actually look at the evidence that vaccines work and decide, ‘It’s not for me.’”

“I was pretty naive,” he said. Until May 2021, Collins “thought that people would come around.”

But he added that he believed flawed government messaging added to the confusion over vaccines. “I think we should have done a more effective job of telling stories people could relate to. We didn’t do a good job of explaining that the science (was) going to evolve.”

In a Feb. 19 discussion of faith and politics, Bill Haslam, a Republican who was governor of Tennessee from 2011 to 2019, said: “There are things that are going to make both sides mad at you.”

But he said he found strength in the 29th chapter of the Book of Jeremiah: “He writes and says get used to it. You’re going to be there for a while. I’m here to seek the welfare of the place where I’ve been called.”

“Jesus always starts with us,” Haslam added. “He starts with the religious people who are there.”

As Christians, “we’re supposed to be different — but we’re not,” he said. “We have a God who calls us to humility. We know we’re broken. So that needs to be our starting point as well.”

Dan Lipinski, a former congressman from Illinois who, by the time of his primary defeat in 2020, was considered the lone pro-life Democrat in Congress, blamed sectarianism.

“We are constantly bombarded by this rule that we must choose one set of beliefs.” Hatred of political opponents “is destroying our country,” he said during the session with Haslam. “We forget that (as Christians) we are called to evangelize the culture. It’s not the role of the government.”

Lipinski, a Catholic, criticized “this idea out there that there are simple answers. We also need to have an understanding that things are not going to be done tomorrow.”

He said politicians suffer from “the fear of stepping out of line with your group. It’s amazing how risk-averse politicians are. In reality, you’re always running scared.

Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit organization based in Montgomery, Alabama, that advocates for fair and equal treatment in the criminal justice system, conceded that he has to put effort into being optimistic.

“I have to be able to believe things I have not seen in order to move forward,” he said in a Feb. 20 presentation. “There is something powerful in what we give one another ... rooted in this idea that we can make a better world.”

Oct. 15 will mark the centenary of the birth of Father Luigi Giussani, the Italian priest and educator who founded the Communion and Liberation movement — originally for students — in the 1950s in Milan.

He died in 2005, and his sainthood cause was formally opened in 2012, giving the priest the title “Servant of God.”

Communion and Liberation, a particular favorite of Pope Benedict XVI, who celebrated Giussani’s funeral Mass, stresses the “experience” of an encounter with Jesus Christ, transforming life into a public purpose.

The largest annual meeting of the group before the pandemic has been a weeklong event, considered a major cultural and political gathering, in Rimini, Italy, every August.

Feb. 28 is the publication date of a new book, “To Give One’s Life for the Work of Another,” containing three spiritual exercises of Communion and Liberation, based on recorded presentations by Giussani.

