



Speakers say bridging racial, ethnic divides must be high priority

By Mark Pattison

Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Mahdi Bray remembered approaching a long-ago street rally for blacks in Washington when he saw a white man with a Roman collar in their midst. He was so startled he asked black activist Stokely Carmichael who he was.

"That's Geno. The priest," Bray said Carmichael told him. "He's cool."

Bray's comments were made as part of a panel discussion on "The Re-Creation of Coalitions: Minorities and Urban Ethnics, Faith Based and Secular," during the Oct. 24-25 "Forum on Public Morality" conducted in Washington.

The forum, sponsored by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, was held to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the birth of Msgr. Geno Baroni, who became the first federal assistant secretary for neighborhoods during the Carter administration, and before that was president of the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs. Msgr. Baroni died in 1984.

Panelists embraced Msgr. Baroni as a colleague, mentor and inspiration for the work they do today. Prior to their presentations, the Eisenhower Foundation had asked each panelist to consider, among other things, how Msgr. Baroni would frame the role of religion in 2005 "to reinforce a progressive agenda," and what tactics he would use to rebuild coalitions between urban ethnic groups and racial minorities that have been frayed for a generation.

Stuart Eizenstat, who was President Jimmy Carter's chief domestic policy adviser, said Msgr. Baroni "helped evolve Jimmy Carter's position on abortion" and "got his church not to judge candidates on a single-issue basis."

What's missing from the American domestic agenda, Eizenstat said, is "the need to talk about poverty reduction in moral terms. ... The need to eliminate the debt burden of the poorest countries was somehow put in moral and religious terms -- and it worked."

Eizenstat suggested that "we ought to put everything on the table" when rebuilding New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. He said a domestic

version of the Millennium Challenge Corp. -- "which I think is the single best initiative of the Bush administration" -- could serve governments big and small by requiring, as its international counterpart does, extensive consultation with the people who would be affected most by aid programs. In American cities, those people would be racial minorities and ethnic groups.

The Millennium Challenge Corp. administers the Millennium Challenge Account, which ties foreign aid to anti-corruption and good government practices in underdeveloped countries.

John Carr, secretary for social development and world peace for the U.S. bishops, said Msgr. Baroni "would be encouraged by the role of religion in public life" but "appalled at the shallowness of the discussions."

Msgr. Baroni, he added, "would be appalled that the faith-based initiative (of the Bush White House) was more rhetoric than resources, more politics than reality" and that it has been "reduced to fighting old battles between church and state."

If a progressive coalition were to re-emerge, Carr said, more work would have to be done. "There are no chapters of People for the American Way in Anacostia," one of Washington's poorest districts, he noted. What remains in poor neighborhoods across America, he said, are "small churches and Catholic schools" -- two places Msgr. Baroni loved to visit in preaching his message of racial and ethnic bridge-building.

Bray, now executive director of the Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation, said there are coalitions to be rebuilt, but warned against two models for coalitions: the "strident ... get you into their faith" kind of coalition, and the "touchy-feely, 'Kum Ba Ya,' Shirley MacLaine syndrome -- we all just want to get along, 'we are the world'" kind of group.

Theological and doctrinal differences exist among faith groups and will continue to exist, Bray said, but that should not rule out the need to find "common ground" on issues affecting the poor.

Invoking some of today's top urban-music performers, Bray urged finding new ways to reach out to urban youths for whom "Eminem is not a candy, 50 Cent is not change, Usher will not get you to your seat, and Lil' Kim is not a new Asian restaurant."

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The lesson of 'Grandma Housing'

Facing slashed spending on the poor, activists look to priest's example

By JOE FEUERHERD

Washington

What lessons are to be learned from a storm named Katrina or from a long-deceased priest named Baroni?

To some influential House Republicans debating federal expenditures last week, the primary lesson of Katrina is that government spending on the poor must be slashed. To other viewers, an entirely different response is required. Those others included approximately two-dozen activists, academics and advocates who gathered not far from the Capitol Oct. 24-25 to brainstorm the next steps on an activist agenda first articulated by Msgr. Geno Baroni.

“What began as a hurricane of nature very quickly became a hurricane of spending here on Capitol Hill -- \$60 billion appropriated in six days, paid for by simply adding to the national debt,” Republican Rep. Mike Pence of Indiana, a leader of the budget-cutting effort, said on the House floor. Faced with a deficit expected to top \$300 billion in each of the next five years and an unanticipated expenditure of \$150 billion to \$200 billion in Gulf rebuilding efforts over the same period, House conservatives are looking to chop \$15 billion more from antipoverty programs that are already slated for \$35 billion in cuts.

The U.S. bishops are among a coalition of religious groups fighting the effort. “We will oppose any effort to pay for the costs of Katrina and Rita by cutting services in essential programs that serve the basic needs of low-income or vulnerable people,” Galveston-Houston Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza, chair of the bishops’ hurricane relief task force, and Brooklyn, N.Y., Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, chair of their domestic policy committee, told members of Congress in an Oct. 19 letter.

Still, it’s a target-rich environment for the true-believing small-government advocates, who, sensing weakness from a beleaguered White House and a Tom Delay-less House leadership, aim to push their party to accept cuts deemed unpalatable by the Republican committee chairman just six months earlier. In addition to health care program reductions, they propose \$1 billion in cuts to the Food Stamp program and potentially large cuts to a dizzying array of domestic spending programs such as Community Development Block Grants, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Social Security Disability Insurance and Section 8 housing vouchers.

What are supporters of government assistance to the poor to do? More than two decades ago, faced with a similar effort to reduce government spending on the awkwardly-named “Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly” program, Baroni offered this advice: “Let’s call it ‘Grandma Housing’ and no one would be against it.”

Several speakers at the Eisenhower Foundation-sponsored symposium that began on what would have been Baroni’s 75th birthday recalled the priest was being cute but not facetious. Baroni, said Carter administration chief domestic policy adviser Stuart Eizenstat, did not speak in bureaucratic jargon. “He talked about poverty reduction and neighborhood preservation in moral terms,” said Eizenstat.

“Geno didn’t believe in ‘programs,’ ” said John Carr, secretary of the U.S. bishops’ Office of Social Development and World Peace and one of numerous Baroni protégés at the meeting.

Baroni, who died of cancer in 1984, did, of course, support “programs.” As director of Office of Urban Affairs of the Washington archdiocese and director of the Urban Task Force of the U.S. Catholic Conference in the late 1960s, he initiated or took advantage of any number of such efforts. As Carter’s assistant secretary for Neighborhood Development, Consumer Affairs and Regulatory Functions, Baroni launched others, everything from the Community Reinvestment Act (requiring banks to invest in local communities as a condition of their federal charter) to the Community Development Corporations he championed. But Baroni, agreed the forum participants, saw such efforts as a means to a specific end, as a way to build local communities where ethnic, religious and gender differences were recognized but did not divide, where white ethnics and minorities appreciated their common interest, such as the dignity that comes from jobs that pay a living wage.

Eizenstat, the Carter-era policy specialist who brought Baroni into government, said he drew lessons from Katrina that differ from those of the budget-cutting House members. The storm, and the public’s reaction to the poverty it revealed, presents an opportunity for conservatives, particularly those of a religious bent, and liberals to work together, he said.

Baroni’s commitment “to develop policies from the neighborhood up,” his moral message, and his desire “to build bridges of understandings” among divergent groups, said Eizenstat, “gives us the right language” to pursue domestic antipoverty strategies today. He pointed to recent international debt relief efforts that brought together traditional supporters of international development but also such divergent personalities as rock star Bono, former North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms and Kansas Republican Sen. Sam Brownback. The result has been “real and meaningful” and “gives the poorest people in the poorest countries a chance.” Similar coalitions based on moral appeals can work here in the United States, said Eizenstat.

For example, said Eizenstat, it would be in keeping with Baroni’s bottom-up approach to poverty alleviation and his search for allies in both parties, for progressives to support such policies as:

- Special tax incentives to overcome barriers to investment in poverty-stricken areas. In Ireland, he noted, such programs have resulted in a level of U.S. investment that dwarfs that of such investment in China.
- Establishment of microcredit programs -- small government-backed loans to home- and community-based businesses. Such efforts, he said, have had a “remarkable impact” in poor nations worldwide.
- Increased access to financial services in poor neighborhoods, a notion pushed by Baroni decades ago through the Community Reinvestment Act.
- A neighborhood-based federal urban grant program, modeled on the Bush administration’s foreign aid Millennium Challenge Grant program. Such an effort should be administered by local governments but conditioned on input and support from the community, said Eizenstat.

Further, said Eizenstat, a tax system that reverses the trend of providing breaks to those “who least need them” at the expense of those “who most deserve them” needs to be established.

Meanwhile, less than two miles from the Baroni discussion as part of the same “budget reconciliation” package that includes the budget cuts, House Republicans continue to push for tax cuts that critics like Eizenstat say disproportionately benefit the wealthy. Without congressional action, \$70 billion in tax cuts promised in 2001 will not go into effect early next year. Ninety-seven percent of the benefit of these tax reductions goes to households earning more than \$200,000 annually, according to the Tax Policy Center.

The Baroni panelists, however, implicitly returned to the unstated question that dominated their meeting: "What would Geno do?"

Perhaps, suggested some of the panelists, he'd ask some fundamental questions, such as: Why are many of "our people" voting against their self-interest and the interests of their communities?

The nation's Hispanics -- the fastest growing minority group and voting bloc in the country -- offer one answer, said Dennis deLeon, president of the Latino Commission on AIDS and former chairman of the New York Human Rights Commission. While sympathetic to Democratic appeals on economic issues, said deLeon, Hispanic culture is generally socially conservative -- opposed to gay marriage and liberal abortion laws. "They vote against their own economic interest because they see erosion on core issues," said deLeon. Over the next decade, predicted deLeon, the Hispanic vote "will become a Republican vote."

Similarly, while Catholic ethnic voters in such key states as Ohio are generally amenable to Democratic positions on economic issues, many can't abide the party's social liberalism, said Carr of the U.S. bishops' conference. A majority of Buckeye State Catholics supported Bush over Kerry in 2004.

The challenge to progressives, said National Council of Churches general secretary Robert Edgar, is to develop "a vision beyond one-year-budgets and two-year elections." A daunting task, perhaps, given that even the one-year budget and two-year election visions haven't been going all that well of late.

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RNS Daily Digest

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Religious, Nonprofit Leaders Gather to Consider New Poverty Coalitions

WASHINGTON _ Leaders of religious groups and secular nonprofits met in Washington this week to encourage the building of new coalitions to address poverty and other issues of social justice.

The two-day gathering ending Tuesday (Oct. 25) was sponsored by the **Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation**, which is aiming to return to an era similar to the 1970s when racial and ethnic groups worked together to solve neighborhood problems.

The Rev. Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, suggested that the international Millennium Development Goals attempting to reduce world poverty should be applied to the United States.

"How many children can we get off of the poverty rolls by the year 2015?" asked Edgar, who is based in New York.

John Carr, secretary of the Department of Social Development and World Peace for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the late Rev. Geno Baroni, a Housing and Urban Development expert on neighborhoods in the 1970s, would be thrilled to see the success of grass-roots efforts on international problems.

But "he would be appalled that there is no similar energy or urgency on neighborhood, community or poverty issues at home," Carr said.

The meeting was organized as a tribute to Baroni's work.

Panel speakers said they agreed with Baroni's philosophy that coalitions should not be defined by a single issue. The Rev. Timothy McDonald, chairman of the Washington-based African American Ministers in Action, criticized conservative black Christian leaders who he said have focused on gay marriage rather than broader issues such as housing, education and employment.

"They've sold their social agenda for this one, single issue of gay marriage, and we're calling them back home," McDonald said. "The gospel mandates that we look at the whole person ... not just who's sleeping with who."

Alan Curtis, president of the Eisenhower Foundation, said the dialogue is expected to lead to the training of grass-roots nonprofit groups so they can better reach the media with their message.

"The real work is just beginning and we intend to create coalitions," he said.

-- Adelle M. Banks

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