

Speakers to spark New Evangelization at Catholic Conferences

By Christopher Harding, Special to The Pilot
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Effective lay evangelists today are following the lead of Pope John Paul II by maximizing the use of all modern forms of communication to spread the Gospel message. While few have imitated the Holy Father in making a music video, they have learned that a multi-pronged media approach reaches the greatest number of souls.

This wide-ranging mindset underlies the ministry of many of the speakers at the upcoming Boston Catholic Men's Conference (4/18) and Boston Catholic Women's Conference (4/19). Among them are Johnnette Benkovic and Curtis Martin, who not only host programs on EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network), but also write books, utilize Catholic radio and address crowds of many thousands such as the ones expected at Boston College's Conte Forum next week.



*Johnnette Benkovic and Curtis Martin will be keynote speakers at this year's Catholic Men's and Women's Conferences. Pilot photo/Courtesy Catholic Men's and Women's Conferences
Pilot photo/ Courtesy Catholic Men's and Women's Conference*

In 1987 an estimated 1 billion people watched John Paul II's "A Prayer for World Peace" when 23 satellites linked him to 16 countries. That same year Johnnette Benkovic, host and executive producer of EWTN's "The Abundant Life," first began her work with Catholic electronic communications.

She notes that while television, radio, and internet can potentially reach millions and offer a certain one-way intimacy, good old-fashioned speeches have their own unique advantages. "There is a synergy between the participants and the presenter that is unlike any other," says Benkovic. "As a presenter, I benefit by being able to see the responses of the attendees. I can gauge what may need more explanation. Likewise, the participants can see and experience my excitement, exhilaration, and passion for the things of God. A live presentation is perhaps the most effective way to communicate the faith."

Both Benkovic and Curtis Martin, co-host of the sports-flavored EWTN series "Crossing the Goal" and "Family Matters," passionately endorse the idea that the "mountain peak" experience of a conference must be followed by ongoing small faith support group meetings during our everyday lives "on the plain."

Martin knows the value of such groups as president and founder of the fast-growing Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS), which has missions at 39 campuses in 21 states including at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. "Hundreds of people invest hundreds of hours to put on conferences like these. But, the hard work is really done after the conference is over. Christianity is a marathon; we need to learn how to run with diligence for a lifetime. Small groups are the most effective way I've ever seen at equipping Catholics for lifelong faithfulness."

Benkovic, who has more than 50,000 women participating in her multi-disciplinary, multi-media Women of Grace study groups, concurs: "While initial conversion of heart can occur in a conference setting, it needs to sink roots in the heart, grow, flourish, and produce fruit. It rarely does this well on its own. We must help each other remain steadfast in times of woe or temptation. If a conference is the catalyst that lights the flame, follow-up is the bellows that keeps the flame lit."

Martin uses a similar metaphor for inspiring men. "If we imagine Christianity as a fire, women in many ways are like a brush fire; you light a spark and the fire begins to burn in a very powerful way and very quickly. Men are more like a 'big old log'; you have to put a lot of fire underneath them before they'll actually catch fire themselves. But, once they do, they can burn for a very, very long time so it is certainly worth the work."

Midday break-out sessions at both events will help ignite support group "home fires." The Men's Conference will feature Jim Caveziel, the actor who played Jesus in "The Passion of the Christ." Joining Caveziel and Martin on the men's program will be NCAA hockey coach Jerry York and fathering expert James Stenton

Women will also hear from Scripture scholar Dr. Mary Healy, charismatic leader Sister Nancy Keller, pro-life activist Kerri Caviezel and Benkovic. Complete details and a video preview available at www.CatholicBoston.org.