

# Conference brings women 'closer to God and one another'

By Jim Lockwood  
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SOUTH END -- A sellout crowd of women, estimated at about 2,000, from parishes across the Archdiocese of Boston gathered for spiritual renewal and solidarity at the 5th annual Boston Catholic Women's Conference at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross Feb. 27.

"It's nice to see 2,000 women who are on the same page -- from all different nations and all different nationalities," said Claire Nicholson, a parishioner of Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Sudbury who has attended all but one of the conferences to date. "It's a great day."

Annamarie Monks, a parishioner at St. Mary Parish in Mansfield, attended her first conference this year.

"It was very uplifting," she said. "I felt a lot of joy."

Monks recalled her father who recently passed away. She said he was a staunch Catholic whose faith inspired him to be active in the 1960s civil rights movement.

"I feel like I was honoring him too by being here today," she said.

The all-day event included four speakers, confession, adoration, praise and worship music, a chance to meet with exhibitors in the adjacent Cathedral High School gymnasium, and Mass with Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley.

Saturday's first speaker was Leah Darrow, a former participant in the television show "America's Next Top Model," who spoke of her Catholic upbringing, modeling career, and return to Christ.

Darrow was followed by Patti Mansfield, a Catholic author who has also participated in Catholic Charismatic Renewal, who spoke about the role of Mary in the lives of today's Catholic women.

After lunch, noted Catholic author Donna-Marie Cooper O'Boyle spoke to participants about how they can share their faith with others, using the example of Mother Teresa.

The speakers' portion of the program was rounded out by Sister Olga Yaqob, an archdiocesan hermit and chaplain at Boston University, who spoke of her journey from Iraq to becoming a nun in the United States.

Saturday's program concluded with a 4:00 p.m. Mass.

"The conference provides an opportunity for women all over the archdiocese to come together in a community of women and be nurtured in their faith and grow closer to God and one another," said Jennifer Schiller, a member of the conference's leadership team and master of ceremonies for each of its five years of existence.

This year's theme was taken from Phillipians 4:13; "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me."

Schiller said that the theme was appropriate this year because of the challenging economic and cultural times that mark today's society. She said St. Paul wrote those words while in a Roman prison.

Darrow discussed how she embraced Christ as her strength after recent modeling endeavors. She admitted to not always living in accordance with her faith in high school and college despite her Catholic upbringing. After college, she appeared on "America's Next Top Model" but was subsequently eliminated. Then, she went to New York City for a risqué photo shoot with an international magazine.

That shoot was a turning point for her.

"It was the furthest thing from modest clothing," Darrow said. "It was embarrassing."

She said she had a vision during the shoot of standing before God and giving to him all that she had.



*A sell-out crowd of nearly 2,000 pack the Cathedral of the Holy Cross for the 2010 Boston Catholic Women's Conference. The day-long event featured adoration, confession and inspirational Catholic speakers. Pilot photo/ George Martell, The Catholic Foundation*

"My hands were empty because I had wasted all my talents on myself," Darrow said. "I was living my life up to this point, in the past decade, for Leah Darrow."

At that point, she left the shoot.

She also discussed how her father drove to New York City from the Midwest and brought her to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as well as the founding of Pure Fashion, which promotes chastity, purity, and modesty in the actions and dress of girls ages 13 to 18.

"It was totally good to hear when she had that conversion and really related to God," said Bridget Rose, 15, a freshman at the Montrose School in Medfield.

Sheila Tighe, a parishioner of St. Mary Parish in Melrose, also liked Darrow's speech.

"She was energetic," Tighe said. "She was fun and she nailed it."

After Darrow's speech, Mansfield addressed the conference.

Mansfield's remarks described how one can get to know and serve Jesus better through a personal relationship with the Blessed Mother.

"My dear and precious sisters, God wants us to be happy," she said. "Surrendering our lives to Jesus is the source of happiness in our hearts."

She also encouraged women in attendance to pray the rosary. She admitted she has difficulty praying the prayer herself.

"It's such a powerful prayer," she said. "It's a prayer that has been requested by our Lady herself."

Attendees appreciated Mansfield's remarks about Mary.

"I'm glad they brought her up," said Kathy Cogan, a parishioner at Sacred Heart Parish in Middleboro. "I feel she's not mentioned enough in the Church. I go to her quite a bit, especially being a mother."

"As mothers, it can make a woman feel closer that we do have someone in the smallest way we can try to mimic," Monks said.

Mansfield's talk led into a eucharistic procession led by Father Michael Harrington, the assistant director of the archdiocese's vocation office. Adoration was available in the lower chapel of the cathedral all day, but the Blessed Sacrament was brought into the main church following Mansfield's talk.

The afternoon featured two more speakers -- O'Boyle and Sister Olga -- and Mass with Cardinal O'Malley.

O'Boyle discussed how Catholics can witness to their faith today. She shared stories from her own life when she helped lead others closer to Christ during situations that may not, at the surface, seem to lend themselves to faith sharing.

She described how she prayed with other passengers on a turbulent airplane ride and how she gave copies of her books to a UPS driver, who shared with her the insight he received from them when he made subsequent deliveries to her home.

"We have to remember that we represent our Church, and what we say and do can have an impact on those around us," O'Boyle said.

Sister Olga discussed how she journeyed from Iraq to the United States, and shared her struggles to realize her dream of becoming a Catholic nun.

Sister Olga was raised as a member of the Assyrian Church of the East, and was a teenager during the First Gulf War.

At that point, she knew that she wanted to become a nun.

"I just really wanted to be near Jesus and I wanted to follow Mary," she said.

Later, she was disowned by her family for refusing an arranged marriage and dismissed from a community of Iraqi nuns she helped form for participating in traditional Catholic devotional practices. She came to the United States in 2001 and received a Master's degree after studying at Boston College and Boston University.

During the Mass, Cardinal O'Malley summarized the meaning of the conference, saying in his homily that the event allows Catholic women to join with their fellow disciples to "faithfully and generously" embrace their mission.

"If we fail to live our mission, the whole world suffers the consequences," Cardinal O'Malley said. "Our humanity is diminished and our destiny is frustrated."

"We need to climb the mountain of prayer to be able to experience God's glory in the community of our fellow believers, and we can survive the Gethsamene experience."

For many who attended, it was powerful indeed.

"I think it opened me to ways to deepen my faith," Monks said.

"It's moving," said Cogan, who attended with her 10-year-old daughter, Kailyn. "It's a good renewal."

"I wait for this to come every year," the elder Cogan added. "This is my big day out."