

Catholic women learn ‘you can’t get too much of Jesus’

By GAIL BESSE

Anchor Correspondent

BOSTON – The eyes of 4,000 women were riveted on the young speaker’s expressive face. She shared her profound joy at finding Christ’s love and the grace to forgive those who had murdered her entire family in the hell of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Immaculee Ilibagiza raised her rosary in thankful tribute. “This is my main weapon. You must pray it with your heart,” she said to those at the March 18 Boston Catholic Women’s Conference. “Trust God. He will never fail you.”

Ilibagiza’s address at this second annual event topped a roster of speakers who clearly connected with the enthusiastic crowd. Each provoked thought and affirmed their Catholic faith.

Each evoked laughter and brought the women to their feet across the massive hall in the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, where the men’s conference had been held the day before.

“The greatest privilege we have as women is to be pro-life,” said Dana Rosemary Scallon, a former member of the European Parliament from Ireland. Dana, as she’s been known in her professional singing career, urged women speak up for life, for the family and for their faith.

“You have the words someone needs to hear. Wherever it is, have confidence that God will give you the words,” she said.

Ilibagiza’s complete confidence in God came through in the story she’s narrated in her first book, *Left to Tell*.

When a tribal civil war erupted in her small African country, she was in college. She escaped the machete-wielding villagers who were her former neighbors by hiding in the home of a Protestant pastor.

With seven other women, Ilibagiza huddled silently for three months in a 12-square foot bathroom. Even the pastor’s children were unaware of their presence as up to 300 people ransacked the home. Outside, a million of her countrymen were slaughtered.

“I couldn’t understand why people would want to kill me. I wanted to hurt them like they hurt me,” she said, describing her spiritual journey from fear and anger to understanding and forgiveness.

With her heart “like a rock,” Ilibagiza first prayed in desperation. She prayed 40 Divine Mercy chaplets daily as she thought about Jesus alone in the desert for 40 days.

She prayed 27 rosaries a day, picturing the events in Christ’s life as she meditated on each mystery. Jesus was innocent, yet He sought forgiveness for those who had crucified Him.

“Finally I just surrendered,” she said. “I asked God how to forgive like He did. Immediately, I felt so good, so happy. I realized these killers were blinded by sin.

“I saw they weren’t crazy, but they just didn’t get it. I could pray for them and love them as children of God who just didn’t get it.”

When the fighting ended, Ilibagiza weighed 65 pounds. Her entire family was dead.

“Bodies were everywhere. It was like the end of the world,” she said. She clung to her rosary and trusted God would sustain her.

Eventually she found a job in the city. When she returned to her village, she met the man who had killed her mother and brother. He had been a respected businessman; now he was dirty, a fearful but unrepentant prisoner.

“I realized – this is what sin can do,” Ilibagiza said. She forgave him, to the shock of her neighbors who had survived the massacre.

A year later she met the jailer who had witnessed that scene. “‘You changed my life by forgiving that guy,’ he said. ‘I thought I had to react to him with hate. I didn’t know there was another way.’”

Speaker Maria Vadia told of the profound conversion that she, too, had experienced. Now an author and public speaker who works with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Archdiocese of Miami, Vadia said her faith was virtually dead until she was 37.

Her Cuban-American family was Catholic in name only; material wealth was their focus. A turning point came when she first witnessed men actually praying at a charismatic service. The Holy Spirit infused her with grace and deep conviction.

“I realized it’s not all about me. Jesus’ purpose, His plan, is to use us to bring others to salvation,” she said.

Sister Linda Koontz also challenged the women to have a “holy boldness.”

“There are people in your own family who have never really heard the Gospel,” she said. A sister of the Holy Name of Jesus and Mary, she works with the poor in Juarez, Mexico, through her outreach, The Spirit of the Lord International Mission.

Catholic woman-of-the-year awards were given: for laywoman, to Mary Jo Kriz of Marlboro for her work as a youth leader; for religious, to Sister Mary Ricci Lloyd, CSJ, of St. Mary Parish in Holliston.

“Remember,” Sister Mary said with a smile, “You can’t get too much of Jesus.”

Gail Besse is a Massachusetts freelance writer.

She can be reached at gailbesse@comcast.net.