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Hunger for faith draws many to Boston event Thousands attend Catholic meeting

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By Sean P. Murphy and Charles A. Radin, Globe Staff | March 18, 2007

Braving the aftermath of the winter's first major snowstorm and a crisis that has chipped away at support for the Catholic Church, more than 3,000 Catholic men gathered yesterday in Boston hoping to deepen their faith through fellowship, music, prayer, and confession.

It was the Boston Catholic Men's Conference, an event created by parishioners three years ago in response to Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley's call for the faithful to help rebuild and strengthen a church reeling from the clergy sexual abuse scandal and a severe financial crisis.

The Boston conference has become the largest such meeting in the country, and has led to creation of a parallel Boston women's conference, also the largest gathering of its kind.

The conferences feature inspirational speakers, facilitators who try to help believers deepen their practice of Catholicism, and opportunities for confession and prayer.

"Five years ago, scandal erupted here in Boston. It was definitely the lowest point in the history of the church in our area," Scot Landry, chief development officer of the Archdiocese of Boston and a co founder of the conference, said in his address to the conference yesterday.

"In those dark days five years ago, many would not have thought that conferences like this were possible," Landry told a sea of men seated in the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center, many of whom arrived at the all-day event after pre dawn snow shoveling.

"Yet, five years later, all of us are here," said Landry, who spoke in tandem with his identical twin brother, Roger, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Church in New Bedford.

O'Malley, now a cardinal, celebrated Mass at the convention center to conclude the day's events at 4 p.m. He said in an interview that "there are many signs of hope" that the church is rebounding.

"People are hungry for God," said O'Malley, sitting among the thousands of other attendees early in the day. "We are made oriented toward God."

Almost everyone interviewed in the convention center hallways and corridors quickly identified a hunger for faith in their lives as motivation to attend.

Nicholas Fecteau, who turns 18 next month, departed by bus from the outskirts of Lewiston, Maine, at 4 a.m. yesterday, accompanied by his father, Blake, and about 40 other men.

"This really gives hope for the future of this country, which right now is going very badly," the younger Fecteau said. "These are people who are willing to stand up for morality. It's really powerful and it's really exciting."

Paul Harrington, 79, of Marlborough, a retired auto worker, likened the "lift" he felt yesterday to his experiences as a volunteer pushing patients in wheelchairs in corridors at the Veterans Hospital in Bedford so they can attend Sunday Mass.

"It does something for you," said Harrington. "It makes you feel you are spiritually alive."

Richard Medeiros, 68, of Wilmington, a retiree who audits classes at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, said

the message he picked up at the conference was to get more involved with other people -- and to have fun.

"It's not all spiritual," he said. "We all need to get together once in a while and just enjoy ourselves."

Jim Baker, 46, a small-business owner from Billerica, said the fellowship of other Catholic men helps him cope with daily pressures.

"As men, we have the same temptations, the same pressures, and problems at work, with wives, with kids," said Baker, a parishioner at St. Theresa of Lisieux Church in Billerica. "After all, we are all sinners by nature," he said.

Landry and five fellow members of the men's prayer group at St. Paul Parish in Cambridge had the idea for the conference after O'Malley's appeal three years ago.

"We asked each other what had meant the most to us in our growth," Landry said. "And several mentioned a conference they had attended in Worcester that drew about 1,000 men."

O'Malley said he was particularly attracted to the idea of organizing such a conference in Boston because of its potential for encouraging the creation of men's groups in the parishes of the archdiocese.

More than 50 men's groups have been created since the first conference.

The first year of the conference, about 500 men were expected; 2,200 attended. Last year, attendance mushroomed to 5,400 men, with 3,300 women attending a women's conference. This year, 4,100 tickets were sold in advance, at \$40 for adults, \$20 for students.

Organizers said attendance this year probably would have topped last year's 5,400 had the region not been hit by a snowstorm.

Landry was a software company executive when he helped inaugurate the conference in 2005. The second year, he resigned that position with the intention of spending three months organizing the conference. Then, he planned to start his own firm. Instead, O'Malley recruited him to be chief development officer of the archdiocese.

The conference awarded several "man of the year" awards: for priest of the year, the Rev. David Barnes, pastor of St. Mary Star of the Sea Church in Beverly, who helped stabilize church finances; for religious of the year, Brother Rahl Bunsu, director of Brotherhood of Hope, for increasing the ministry on college campuses in the Boston area; and for layman of the year, Dr. John Bratton of Mashpee, a research scientist who has counseled Catholics of the complexities of bioethics.

The Boston Catholic Women's Conference is scheduled at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center all day today.

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