



Tessa Visconti of Stoneham (right) holds her rosary as she prays alongside Lynda Collins of Ludlow during a Catholic women's conference in South Boston yesterday. (Tia Chapman for The Boston Globe)

Catholic women hear O'Malley's call Urges 4,000 to act on their faith

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By David Abel, Globe Staff | March 19, 2007

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley called on thousands of Catholic women in Boston yesterday to stand up for their values, particularly when men's voices do not carry as much currency.

"You have a credibility, just by being women, to speak about life, marriage, and family that oftentimes is not accorded to priests and bishops," he said. "The church is counting on our women to speak that word. I ask you to be courageous."

More than 4,000 women crowded into the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center for the second Boston Catholic Women's Conference, surpassing the number of men at a similar conference on Saturday. Local parishioners started the men's event three years ago in response to O'Malley's call for the faithful to help rebuild and strengthen the church, which had been mired in the clergy sexual abuse scandal and a severe financial crisis.

After a procession to a hymn written to the "Ode to Joy," the gray-haired cardinal, dressed in flowing robes and sandals, stepped to the podium and told the women: "I want to congratulate you; you have eclipsed the men in this holy competition."

He added: "Passing on the faith, speaking God's word, is not easy in today's world, and especially in Massachusetts."

The men and women's conferences have become the nation's largest meetings of their kind.

Scott Landry, a cofounder of the conference, said more women attended than anticipated. But he said organizers wouldn't cover all the costs of the weekend conference, which amounted to about \$300,000. The snowstorm reduced attendance at the men's conference to 3,000, about 2,000 fewer than expected.

Unlike the men's conference, when water poured through the convention center's roof, yesterday's

combination of music, prayer, and bonding went off without a glitch, Landry said.

"It was so bad, you could have taken a shower at the men's conference," he said.

He said the conferences differed in style. "Men prefer to be challenged and fired up," he said. "Women prefer the reaffirmation of their faith and speakers who can take them deeper into their internal prayers."

One of the speakers was Immaculee Ilibagiza of Rwanda, who spoke about how her faith helped her survive the 1994 genocide that killed hundreds of thousands of people in her country.

The program also included confession, singing, and an afternoon Mass with O'Malley.

Amy Belger , 39, of South Weymouth, came with her 6-week-old daughter.

"I think listening to speakers like Immaculee helps put your problems in perspective," she said. "I think the cardinal's message to women was that we're in a unique position to speak about life, and that's an important message to take away."

Bernadine Clifford , 47, of Groveland, came with her daughter-in-law. "This conference just reaffirms who I am," she said.

Others took away the repeated message of reconciliation, forgiveness, and acceptance.

"We're all united, even if we're from different churches," said Etelvinia Etienne , 42, a Cape Verdean who lives in Avon. "Diversity is what makes us strong." ■

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