

Boston men and women gather in faith

By Neil W. McCabe Pilot correspondent

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Top: Cardinal O'Malley joins with more than 3,000 participants at the Boston Catholic Men's Conference March 17.

Below: Christina Perron prays at the March 18 Boston Catholic Women's Conference.

Pilot photo/ Gregory L. Tracy; Bottom: George Martell photo

SOUTH BOSTON--More than 3,100 men prayed, sang and worshiped together March 17 at the Boston Catholic Men's Conference held at Boston's Convention and Exhibition Center.

Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, standing with Scot Landry, one of the founding organizers of the event, just outside the rows of vendor tables, said he was excited by the growth of the conference and the men's group movement in the three years since the first conference.

The cardinal was a full participant in the day's programs. He heard confessions. He sat in the front row to hear the four keynote addresses. He greeted and chatted with other attendees as he made his way between the different areas, such as the rows of vendor tables, the main speakers' room and the confessional room upstairs, where he heard confessions with dozens of his brother priests. At the end of the day, he celebrated the conference's closing Mass.

The emphasis this year was on helping the attendees reach a deeper and more sustainable participation, said Karl Wirth, another founding organizer, who was the conference's master of ceremonies. "That's why we reduced the number of speakers from five to four."

The speakers this year were former Swiss Guard Andreas Widmer; Father Roger Landry and his twin brother Scot, who heads the archdiocese's development office; Carl A. Anderson, the supreme knight of the Knights of Columbus; and Cardinal Peter Turkson, the archbishop of Cape Coast, Ghana.

Widmer's talk mixed his personal interactions with Pope John Paul II and the leadership precepts he observed in the pontiff.

Pope John II was a conservative man, who didn't always accept conventions, he said. When he learned that Romans hated no one more than the Gypsies and the homeless, he commenced audiences for only Gypsies and only the homeless.

Before John Paul II, it was the custom of the Swiss Guard to kneel before a pope, either as he passed by or when he was addressed. John Paul II ended this practice and issued instructions for members of the guard to shake his hand when they met and for them to look him in the eye when they spoke.

The Landry brothers spoke from twin pulpits, trading turns. Father Landry is the pastor to St. Anthony Church in New Bedford and the editor of *The Anchor*, the newspaper of the Diocese of Fall River. They shared lessons from their upbringing and how they were putting lessons to work to shore up today's Church.

As the supreme knight of the Knights of Columbus, Anderson is the CEO of the world's largest Catholic fraternal organization. Anderson opened his remarks with a true crowd-pleaser, "To be in Boston on St. Patrick's Day with thousands of Catholic men--It doesn't get any better than that."

Anderson spoke to the special difficulties of being a Catholic American, with specific references to the Church's struggles in Massachusetts. "It has never been easy to live a Catholic Life."

In 1854, the Know-Nothing party took over control of Massachusetts state government and passed a law banning Catholics from holding office in the state, he said.

Yet, 106 years later, a Catholic from Massachusetts and brother knight, John F. Kennedy, was elected the first Catholic president, he said. Two years later, John W. McCormack, also a brother knight, became the nation's first Catholic Speaker of the House, he said.

"1960 was not the year our challenges ended. They simply changed," he said. In Massachusetts, and the rest of the country, there are threats to freedom of conscience that attempt to coerce Catholics into performing abortions, distributing contraception and placing orphans in same-sex households.

"Attacks on the right of conscience have never been more serious," he said. "Catholics are put in the impossible position of either violating the law or violating their conscience."

Anderson said in the past and in the future, the Knights of Columbus will continue to stand up for religious freedom and confront anti-Catholic bigotry regardless of the opposition. "When the prince has fallen, the mercenary of the conscript may leave the field of battle to the enemy. But, not the knight."

The Church in Africa has much to share with Catholics in the rest of the world, said Cardinal Peter Turkson in his address.

In the 1969, Pope Paul VI declared in Uganda that Africa was the new homeland for Christ, he said. But, now the African Church is looking outward and sharing the unique experience of the African family life as a universal template.

"In an African family, we don't talk about rights, we talk about obligations," he said. "All members of the family have a job to do."

The African family is held together by collectivity and solidarity, he said. "These are best celebrated when the family comes together for a common meal."

The cardinal said in 1994 at a Synod of African bishops, they developed a comprehensive teaching and worshiping document called "The Church as the Family of God."

After each speaker, Wirth directed the audience to thought-provoking questions in the program. He also encouraged participants to record their own impressions in the programs for later meditation.

Throughout the day, in the interlude between speakers, Martin Doman, a singer-songwriter, who produces eucharistic praise and worship programs for the Diocese of Harrisburg, Pa., led the audience in song and facilitated worship.

“This year, we wanted to focus on the life after the conference,” said Wirth.

With an eye towards sustainment, the organizers set up breakout sessions on how to start men’s groups in their own parishes and a lessons-learned workshop for up and running men’s groups, he said.

Organizers inaugurated awards for the archdiocese’s Catholics of the Year, presented to the previous year’s outstanding layman, religious or deacon and priest, said Wirth, who made the introductions and the presentations.

The Priest of the Year was presented to Father David Barnes, the pastor of St. Mary Star of the Sea Church in Beverly.

The Layman of the Year was presented to Dr. John Bratton, of Christ the King Church in Mashpee.

The Deacon or Religious of the Year was presented to Brother Rahl Bunsu, a member of the Brotherhood of Hope, a community of brothers whose mission is the New Evangelization, Wirth said.

The brothers focus on campus ministry locally at Boston University and Northeastern University, he said.

This year’s attendance was down from last year’s 5,200, which organizers ascribed to the brutal storm that hit the city Friday evening.

One attendee from Chelsea, who called himself Justbo, said he was in Memphis when his flight was cancelled, so he rented a car and drove the 20 hours to make it.

Another group of six men from the parish of St. Margaret Church in Seldon, N.Y., was originally 12 before the weather made the others drop out, said Frank C. DeStefano, the group’s driver for the eight-hour journey from Long Island.

DeStefano was also the group’s innkeeper. When they arrived in Boston at 4 a.m. Saturday, there were no hotel rooms available, he said. Nowhere else to go, the men slept in his van until the conference doors opened at 8:30 a.m.

The snow challenged the scheduled speakers, as well, said Widmer, whose speaking slot was as the last minute replacement for “Pope Fiction” author Patrick Madrid. “We tried to fly him into three different airports before giving up.”

Widmer said Martin Doman flew into Manchester, N.H., and drove down to Boston and Carl A. Anderson drove up from New Jersey.

Standing on stage in front of the crowd of men was a very powerful experience, he said. “It is hard not to be moved as 4,000 men recited the Lord’s Prayer together.”