

Women exhorted to ‘Discover the Treasure Within’

By Donis Tracy, Pilot correspondent

Posted: 3/23/2007



Faith sustained speaker Immaculee Ilibagiza as she hid with seven other women in a tiny room for 91 days to survive the 1994 genocide in her native Rwanda. George Martell photo

SOUTH BOSTON -- They came from every region of the archdiocese. Some were old, some young; some mothers with babies in their arms; some elderly with their caretakers at their side. All came together, as one formidable body, to share one thing: their Catholic faith.

This year's Boston Catholic Women's Conference, held March 18 at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, brought together over 4,100 women to "Discover the Treasure Within," the conference's central theme.

"You have no idea what an encouragement this gathering is throughout the world," said speaker Dana Scallon, a Christian singer and Irish politician, during her address. Intermingling her talk with contemporary Christian songs she has written, Scallon urged the women to "speak for life."

Scallon, one of four women who delivered addresses during the daylong event, spoke about the need to stand for Christian values in today's world. Cuban-born Maria Vadia, an active member of the Charismatic Renewal program in Miami, spoke of the need to understand the gifts of our faith. Sister Linda Koontz, SNJM, also active in the Charismatic Renewal program in El Paso, Texas, talked about discerning the power of the Holy Spirit working within each person.

Although each of the talks had a different focus, each speaker gave personal witness of her faith and urged the conference participants to share their faith with others.

"God has prepared a podium for each person," Scallon told the audience. "Have confidence that God will give you the words to speak when that time comes."

The final address of the day was delivered by Immaculee Ilibagiza, a Rwandan-born Catholic who survived the 1994 genocide when she and seven other women huddled together in a tiny bathroom for 91 days.

Ilibagiza, who published the account of her ordeal in her book, "Left to Tell," recounted her experience and told the crowd how her faith sustained her throughout her ordeal.

"I can stand here and tell you about the greatness of God," she began.

Ilibagiza, a member of the Tutsi tribe, told the audience how her father arranged for their family friend, a Protestant pastor of the Hutu tribe, to hide her as the killings began.

"The fear and the anger was just burning my skin. I remember thinking, 'How can somebody want me to die?' I picked up my rosary, though I didn't know in that second, if God existed or not," she said.

Praying the rosary became her only solace in the cramped bathroom she shared with seven other women, often praying it 40 times each day.

"As I was going through the life of Christ, trying to meditate as if it was happening today, I felt like my anger was a rock, a wall, between me and Him," she said. "Slowly, as I was saying the rosary...I realized I shouldn't pity myself."

It was then that Ilibagiza surrendered her will to God, she said.

"From the moment I surrendered I felt like a luggage was removed from my shoulder," she said.

"It was the first time I understood that I can pray for [the killers] and I can love them as children of God who do not know what they are doing," she continued.

"I cannot tell you how much with the knowledge -- and I was still in the bathroom -- I felt free."

Ilibagiza went on to tell how after the killings ended, and she emerged from the safety of her hiding spot, "everybody in my family was killed -- my parents, my brothers, grandparents, uncles."

"I didn't know how to move on, but I said to God, 'God, I have just met You in the bathroom. I know You can act,'" she said with a smile.

Ilibagiza said she continues to rely on her faith in all of her decisions.

"My weapon is my rosary," she said.

In addition to the keynote speakers, conference participants were invited to participate in eucharistic adoration, as well as the Sacrament of Reconciliation, both of which were available throughout the day. Over 100 exhibitors, such as the Daughters of St. Paul, the Catholic Daughters of the Americas and the World Apostolate of Fatima, set up their displays in the exhibit hall.

The conference ended with a Mass celebrated by Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley.

"I want to congratulate you. You have eclipsed the men" began Cardinal O'Malley in his homily.

The cardinal spoke of the unique position of women in supporting life.

"You have a credibility, just by being women, to speak of life, of family," he said. "I'm asking you to speak about life, about the family, about the truth."

“We’re here because generations of Catholics have passed their faith on. Now it’s our turn,” the cardinal said.

New to the conference this year, Catholics of the Year Awards were presented prior to the afternoon speaker program. The award for Catholic Religious Woman of the Year went to Sister Mary Ricci, CSJ, from St. Mary parish in Holliston. The Catholic Woman of the Year Award was presented to Mary Jo Kriz for her work with teens in Marlborough.

Conference participant Lynn Dubeau was impressed with the women’s conference. Unable to attend last year’s conference because she had a young baby, the Wrentham resident brought her toddler, Danielle, to this year’s conference.

“It was fantastic,” she said. “I was excited to see such a variety of speakers. And though I wasn’t sure how people would react to having my daughter here, I think everyone has been very receptive to having young children here.”

Molly Bloomer, a postulant in the Franciscan Sisters Minor, also was impressed with the conference. “It’s been a very uplifting time to be with all these women. These speakers have been fantastic. It’s a pump to pray with your whole heart and not to fall back to your old ways.”