

Praise and worship marks Women's Conference

By Christine Williams
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Sister Olga Yaqob, campus minister at Boston University receives the Catholic of the Year Award for a religious woman. Sister Olga was also a speaker at the conference.

Pilot photo/ George Martell

CHESTNUT HILL -- Speakers at the 3rd annual Boston Catholic Women's Conference shared their struggles and trust in the Lord with a crowd of more than 2,800 Catholic women from all over New England. The conference, entitled "The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength," was held at Boston College's Conte Forum April 18 from 5-10 p.m.

The evening consisted of presentations by three female speakers, praise and worship music, adoration and confession.

Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley was unable to attend the Women's Conference but recorded a video message for participants. The cardinal said he was invited to a dinner with Pope Benedict XVI in New York City as part of the papal visit to the United States. Cardinal O'Malley assured the women that he would talk with the Holy Father about the Women's Conference.

Opening prayer at Conte Forum was led by Sister Olga Yaqob, campus minister at Boston University. She prayed that God's "beloved daughters" would seek his grace and strength in their lives.

Later that evening, Sister Olga was presented with the Catholic of the Year Award for a religious woman. As she approached the podium to receive her plaque, she knelt by a statue of Mary and kissed her feet.

The lay woman who received the Catholic of the Year Award was Patricia Marks, a parishioner at St. Michael Parish in Bedford, who designed a religious education program for children with learning disabilities. She is the director of religious education at St. Michael's and has served as an instructor for over 20 years.

The first conference speaker, Stacey McGovern, a teacher and mother of three, spoke on the topic "Do Not Be Afraid: Trusting that God's Love will bring Joy and Strength."

For reasons unknown to doctors, McGovern began losing her hearing in her mid-20s. By the time she and her husband began a family, doctors declared her "profoundly deaf." She longed to hear her children's voices and feared she would be unable to hear their cries when they were in danger. After many doctor's visits and daily prayers for five years that God would restore her hearing, McGovern elected to have cochlear implant surgery.

Soon after, the implants brought back her hearing and she had a child-like joy at the noises -- what she termed "thousands of miracles" -- she could once again hear. She tapped on counters, crunched snow under her feet and called stores late at night just to listen to their automated menus.

McGovern said she was "overwhelmed by God's greatness."

"When people say to me, 'Wow, isn't technology amazing?' I say, 'Wow, isn't God amazing?'" she said.

A year after the successful surgery, McGovern was stepping off a train when it began to move. Her three-year-old was on the train in front of a moving doorway and her 18-month-old, who had learned to unbuckle himself, was in a stroller next to a moving train. She put the brake on the stroller and ran after the train. Then, she jumped on, grabbed her son, and in an effort to get back to her other child quickly, she leapt from the train.

McGovern fractured her pelvis in several locations, but doctors were amazed that her son who was in her arms was unharmed.

Initially, McGovern felt sorry for herself. Like when she lost her hearing, she felt that God had forgotten about her. Over time, she realized that the suffering she endured had taught her invaluable lessons.

"God is there. He's working things even when we don't know it," she said. "He's timing things perfectly."

Immediately following McGovern's presentation, Kimberly Hahn spoke about "The Strength of the Humble." Hahn, an author and mother of six who holds a degree in theology, made many references to Scripture. She encouraged the women to allow the word of God to pierce their hearts with truth.

She also exhorted them to "give up the illusion of control" and admit their weakness and need for God's strength.

Hahn said, "The question is not, 'Am I strong enough to serve God?' but 'Am I weak enough?'"

The final speaker of the evening was Patti Mansfield, mother of four and recipient of the papal medal, whose talk was entitled "Joyfully Living through the Power of the Holy Spirit."

Mansfield said her first choice university had been Boston College, but she did not receive sufficient financial aid to attend. Her next choice was Duquesne University in Pittsburg where, on retreat, she and others were baptized in the Holy Spirit. The experience was the genesis of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, a movement which has impacted 150 million Catholics in 235 countries.

Mansfield stressed that the students on that retreat in 1967 were "absolutely ordinary people." She had never been on a retreat before. She described the experience she had as "diving in the ocean that is God."

She called on the women to be Jesus' disciples, not his "co-pilots."

"In every life there is a throne -- a center," she said. "Christ calls us to vacate the throne."

Mansfield then led the group in a Charismatic prayer service that included a Eucharistic procession, adoration and praise and worship music.

Chris Kearney, a parishioner at St. Mary Parish in Wrentham, said she went through struggles last year and appreciated the reminder she received at the Women's Conference that suffering is temporary.

"Our struggles are not forever," she said.

Lynette Harvey, also from St. Mary's, said she enjoyed most "the fellowship of women in faith."

She added, "The message was that through suffering there is hope. God has purpose for your life."