



Schedule change, move to cathedral aimed at making it easier to attend Boston Catholic Women's Conference

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BILLERICA -- The Boston Catholic Women's Conference, the annual gathering of Catholic women now in its fifth year, is on the move -- both in time and place.

The venue will change from an expansive convention center to an environment that is a bit more spiritual -- the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston's South End, the mother church of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston.

For the first time, the women's conference will also take place on a different weekend than the Boston Catholic Men's Conference, which was founded in 2005 by Lowell native Scot Landry.

The women's conference -- whose theme is "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me" -- is scheduled for Saturday, Feb. 27, from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., with a snow date of March 6. The men's conference is scheduled for Saturday, April 17, from 9 a.m. until 5:30 p.m., also at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross.

The move to the cathedral, which has recently undergone renovations, will mean fewer available seats than at its former venues -- Boston College Conte Forum and the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center. For February's event, 1,735 tickets will be sold. In 2006, 3,300 women attended the inaugural women's conference. Last year, 2,800 women attended.

Organizers say that lower set-up costs at the cathedral mean lower ticket prices. All tickets this year are \$20 per person, or \$30 with lunch.

Another bonus is that the women's conference can now be held on Saturday, instead of Sunday or Friday night, as in previous years when the men's and women's conferences were booked back to back.

That's a big plus, according to St. Andrew Parish's Fran Gulia, parish co-captain of the women's conference. She's the mother of five children 10 years old and under. Arranging child care will now be easier for her and her husband, Riccardo, who attends the men's conference.

"Having it the same weekend as the men's conference made it difficult for married couples, especially those who have to work out child care for the entire weekend," said Gulia. "Also, many of the women teach religious education on Sundays, so they had to make the choice between teaching their class or going to the conference."

Gulia considers the historic cathedral, dedicated in 1875 by Archbishop John J. Williams, Boston's first archbishop, another draw. Among its beautiful interior, stained glass and expansive altar is a Hook and Hastings pipe organ widely considered one of the finest of its type in the country.

"Many of the women in our group have never been to the cathedral, so this is a great chance to see it," Gulia said.

Gulia's co-captain, Dawn King, is among those who will be visiting the cathedral for the first time.

"I'm really excited to go there," King said. "I think it will really add to the conference spiritually, versus a convention hall. It will have a different feel to it this time."

King and Gulia are looking forward to the exhibitions, time for reflection, a Mass celebrated by Cardinal Sean O'Malley, confession, adoration and especially the inspirational speakers, whom Gulia describes as having "such enthusiasm and a love for God."

Speakers this year include Patti Mansfield, who also spoke at the 2007 conference; Leah Darrow, a professional model who partnered with "Pure Fashion" ministry to teach young women about authentic Catholic fashion; Donna-Marie Cooper O'Boyle, an author and speaker who was transformed by a decade-long friendship with Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta; and Sister Olga of the Eucharist, a sister from Iraq, who ministers on the campus of Boston University.

"They (the organizers) have tried to make sure that there is a draw for all age groups by including speakers of all different generations," said Gulia, who calls Darrow a "good role model" for the younger generation.

She hopes that "more women would come with us. It's such a great day, with a good variety of activities. If you want prayerful, you have that. If you want speakers or exhibitors, you have that. If you want adoration, you have that, too. You can go from a quiet place to pray to lots of noise and activity."

King lauds the fellowship with women and sees it as a "day you commit to yourself, allowing you to share faith with other women who are the same. I always go in with an open mind and no expectations, and every time I go, I learn something new."

For more information, visit www.catholicboston.com.

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