

Beauty in word and art and in a Catholic women's conference



I can hardly remember how it happened. Sometime this summer I fell into a Facebook conversation about the possibility of planning a conference for our regional Catholic women blogging group. My friends Julie and Theresa and I agreed that none of us could host an event at our homes.

It could have ended there.

Then I found myself suggesting the Shrine of St. Anthony in Ellicott City as a possible location. Maybe I would just call for pricing, I said. You know, just for fun. I reached out and discovered the prices were surprisingly reasonable.

Hmm.

Maybe this was something we could actually pull off.



We agreed we had very little time to contribute to make it happen, but the idea just wouldn't let us go—especially once Julie suggested embracing the theme of beauty and the new evangelization. That sparked a series of conversations as we began to envision what that conference might look like.

We found two dynamite speakers—Annie Deddens of Pray More Novenas and

Catholic Wife, Catholic Life, and Colleen Duggan, author of *Good Enough Is Good Enough: Confessions of an Imperfect Catholic Mom*—who said yes.



Then the week we were planning to open registration the Pennsylvania grand jury report was published. Julie, Theresa, and I connected by phone, feeling all the emotions of the news, and tried to decide what to do.

Should we cancel? Should we postpone? Should we change the theme?

In the end we agreed to move forward. We wanted—and needed—the conference more than ever. It was a bit of a leap of faith—but if you’re not going to take a leap of faith while planning a conference for Catholic women, when will you?

Along the way, we ran up against one challenge after another, but we persevered, believing that God must really have something amazing in store if there were so many hurdles to overcome. Somehow, some way, it would work out.

And—wow—it did.



A group of 28 women came together on Saturday for “Beauty in Word & Art: Catholic Women Writers, Artists & Social Media Voices in the New Evangelization” at the Shrine. The day was an absolute gift. The women who attended were open and excited, ready to connect. Some flew in or drove a few hours; others came a few miles.

It was an absolutely extraordinary day.

I'm not sure whether it was the speakers, who were incredibly poignant and inspiring, or the group of women, who were thoughtful and warm and friendly and genuine. It might have been the Shrine, which is an incredible spot to gather and reflect and pray. It might have been that we were able to offer participants a chance



to go to Confession and Mass. It might have been the way the drizzly rain of the morning turned into crisp fall sunshine in the afternoon. It might even have been the unlimited coffee.

All I can say is: The Holy Spirit showed up. God was with us throughout the day. I didn't sense it as much in the morning when I was rinsing berries and worrying about where the projector screen was standing. But at noon when I slipped into a pew at Mass and the first hymn was "For the Beauty of the Earth," I knew God had us in the palm of His hand.

This conference wasn't about any of us. It was about all of us. It was about Him. We were just along for the ride—and the chance to leave refreshed and renewed.

The speakers gave us so much to carry with us. Annie spoke to us about beauty that isn't meant to impress, but to engage.



"When we share something beautiful with other people, we draw them out of themselves and let them know they are not alone," she told us, reminding us that we are experiencing beauty in our lives just as they are. "Sharing the imperfections reaches further into people's hearts than sharing the perfect things."

Annie encouraged us to find time for silence in our days so God can speak to us and described beauty as “an abundance of Christ.”

“Beauty can be used to evangelize and to move people’s hearts,” she said. “That’s only when it’s authentic beauty.”



Then she spoke about social media as offering better opportunities to connect with people and help them feel less alone—and invited us to split into groups and share a beautiful encounter we experienced online in the last month. The encounters I heard in my group were so touching.

During Colleen’s talk, she advised us not to use the time we can and worry less about the outcome.

“Commit to doing the thing the best you can in the season you’re in in imperfect conditions,” she said. “Work hard, do the best you can, develop your talent, and leave the rest to God.”

Assuring us that we cannot wait for the perfect moment to write or create, Colleen advised us to stay in our lane, say our personal truth, and be real.



“Accept that you will have to work in imperfect conditions. Great works of art come from imperfect conditions. If we wait for a perfect time, we’ll never have anything to say,” she said. “We don’t have to do perfect. We don’t have to do beautiful. We have to do good.”

So many times during the planning, when Colleen would check in to see how things

were coming together, I would tell her the latest thing that wasn't quite going the way we thought it should. We would laugh and remind each other that it would be "good enough."



And it was—and maybe even a little bit better than that.

I had been a little concerned that as a planner, I might not have time to enjoy the day. But somehow I was able to be both Mary and Martha and get a tremendous amount out of my time with this incredible group of creative, courageous women. I had a blast.

I am so very grateful to my co-planners, Julie and Theresa, to our speakers Annie and Colleen, to Ginny who offered a workshop, and to all the women who attended, many of whom stepped up to help in wonderful ways. I often marvel at how God created individuals who can walk into a situation, assess it, see what needs to be done, and do it. If that's not beauty, I don't know what is.