

Catholic Men's Fellowship of Maryland conference elicits emotion, inspires action

FULLERTON - Tom Flynn, a parishioner of St. Ursula in Parkville, sat in the pews of St. Joseph Church in Fullerton, fighting back tears as he listened to the keynote speakers at the 22nd annual Catholic Men's Fellowship of Maryland Conference March 23.

"I'm an emotional guy," Flynn said, "and what these people were saying really touched me personally."

Flynn was among more than 800 men who were inspired to act at the gathering, which included Mass, opportunities for adoration and reconciliation, and speakers such as Dominican Father Peter John Cameron, first American editor-in-chief of "Magnificat," the monthly Catholic worship aid.

In the morning session, Father Cameron told a gripping, heartfelt story of a father of conjoined newborn twins who was able to distinguish his daughters at baptism - just 45 seconds after birth.

"This is how God the father loves us, one by one," said Father Cameron, who cheered on the attendees. "So brothers, authentic fathers, let's get out there and love our wives, our children, our friends and neighbors in the way that God loves us because St. Joseph makes it possible."

In the afternoon, Father Cameron shared the story of the husband of a teacher's aide killed in the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012, his decision to seek healing through Christ, and the need for Catholic men to be present for those who are suffering. (Sandy Hook is in the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., where Archbishop William E. Lori served before becoming archbishop of Baltimore).

"This is your vocation," Father Cameron said. "Suffering has to enter into our hearts. When it comes, we're going to beg for its meaning and be grateful for the

new place, the capacity it creates in our hearts to be compassionate, and a man of mission to alleviate the suffering of others. Grace always enters through a wound.”

He encouraged the men to share personal challenges with their children and friends, and to be authentic in the way they suffer.

“Get together with a small group of men,” he suggested, “and share three questions: What is the challenge you are going through, what are you grateful for, and what do you need prayers for?”

In that same vein, Pete Ascosi, assistant director of Baltimore-based ChristLife, asked attendees to consider several possible actions, including sharing videos and books, evangelizing the faith, and making a daily commitment to Jesus Christ.

Ascosi shared his own call to action, as he said, “It was other people in my life who reached out to me. Your faith shared can change other people’s lives. That’s our calling. Invite the men in our lives to discover Christ.”

Zoltan Szabo, a parishioner of St. Dominic in Hamilton, heard a slightly different call to act.

“I’m an old man,” he laughed, “but I pledge to make my spiritual life a little more fruitful, and to be a better husband and father.”

The other keynote speakers were Stephen Ray, a documentary producer and bestselling author who spoke about Joseph, the man closest to Christ, and the challenges of the secular world; and Father Charles Canterna, of the archdiocesan Office of Prison Ministry, who told of his experiences and calling men to holiness.

Each keynote speaker received a standing ovation, but none matched the reception when Father Steven Roth, vocations director for the archdiocese, introduced its seminarians.

“If we’re ever looking for examples of men who are choosing Jesus Christ as their winning team,” Father Roth said, “we have 38 men who have given up their whole lives as seminarians studying to be priests.”

Archbishop Lori presided at afternoon Mass, and shared the story of the prodigal son in his **homily**.

“Isn’t it the case that we need to make room for one another in our hearts,” he said, “actively seeking out the unchurched, actively seeking out young men and fathers of families, those who are searching for something more, welcoming their ideas and their ways of doing things?”

After a pause and a smile, he said, “Those of us like myself who have been around for awhile, I can tell you, it’s not always easy. Let us ask that we may be forgiving and eager to welcome those who want to join us in our parishes.”

Ed Roberts, vice president of Catholic Men’s Fellowship of Maryland, said its board is exploring ways to reach more men in the future, and mentioned holding the conference at larger venues.

“I pray that the conference continues to serve as a launching pad for men to stand up for their faith,” Roberts said. “Catholic men and men of other faiths need not be afraid to claim belief in Christ Jesus and all that he stands for in our lives.”

Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly attributed a quote by Pete Ascosi to John Romanowsky, director of evangelization for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The Review regrets the error.

Also see:

Former Yankee star and Mount St. Joseph graduate headlines Catholic Men’s Conference