

Maryland women's conference keynote asks for prayer for priests

ARBUTUS - Priests need spiritual mothers.

In a talk sprinkled with stories of Ss. Therese of Lisieux, Teresa of Avila, Mother Teresa of Kolkata and Pope John Paul II, keynote speaker Kathleen Beckman asked participants at the Maryland Catholic Women's Conference Oct. 6 to pray for priests, to remain faithful to the church in spite of the clergy abuse scandals and to be like Mary.

Beckman, author of "When Women Pray" and president of the Foundation of Prayer for Priests, urged participants to pray for priests first, even before their own families.

"I am investing in my family when I invest in the priesthood," she said, noting the gifts her family has received through priests, such as the sacraments.

"I love this (conference's) theme, 'Fearless'," Beckman said, quoting St. John's epistle: "Perfect love casts out fear."

"Who among us knows how to love perfectly? The heart of our Redeemer," she said. "Pray for love. Go to the heart of Jesus and pray for that perfect love to cast out fear."

In the wake of clergy sexual abuse, Beckman asked participants to remain faithful to the church. She said the Foundation for Prayer for Priests has seen a 150 percent increase in membership since the news of allegations of misconduct against Archbishop Theodore McCarrick of Washington and the Pennsylvania attorney

general's report detailing abuse by priests there.

"Do not be afraid," she said.

She asked participants to go to Mass more often, to pray together.

"Be that vessel of light God calls us to be," she said. "If I went to Mass only on Sunday, I don't know if I'd be Catholic. I have to go every day. The most powerful prayer in the church is liturgical prayer, the Mass."

Prayer can be powerful, according to Beckman. Recalling the murder of her father-in-law, she wrestled with God, vengeful and angry. But as she prayed over a period of weeks, she released that need for vengeance and prayed for mercy for the murderer.

"I was flooded with awareness of his love," she said. "Fear was gone. Joy returned."

Citing Mary standing at the foot of the cross as an example of fearlessness, Beckman urged participants to seek a Marian heart: to follow her silence, her serenity, her surrender.

Mary's silence at Calvary was transformed into adoration. Silence during prayer is a time to listen.

"The word was made flesh in the silence," recounted Beckman, whose serenity remained even in her pain. "Mary teaches us to ponder our daily lives in the light of God's love."

Mary's surrender to the will of God makes her our spiritual mother, she added, noting. "Mary will give birth to Jesus in us."

The conference drew 290 women to hear keynote talks by Beckman and Ralph

Martin, president of Renewal Ministries, an organization devoted to Catholic renewal and evangelization. Singer and worship leader Corrie Marie led music throughout the day.

The annual conference was shortened to a single day and moved from Mount St. Mary's University to the motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence due to a scheduling conflict, according to Jeanne Link, a conference organizer.

Participants described the day's talks and prayer as "powerful."

"I feel so much strength coming and meeting with other women who are here," said Sara Sraver, a parishioner of St. Joseph in Emmitsburg.

"Everybody reinforced God's will and trusting God no matter how difficult it is," said Michele Craig, a parishioner of Ss. Peter and Paul in Easton.

Tiffany Bianchi, a parishioner of St. John in Westminster, was attending her fifth conference.

"It's my one day to get away to pray and reflect and refocus," she said. "We're all in this together."

Catherine Gara, a parishioner of St. Thomas Aquinas in Hampden, said the theme of "Fearless" drew her. "It's something I have been feeling I should work on."