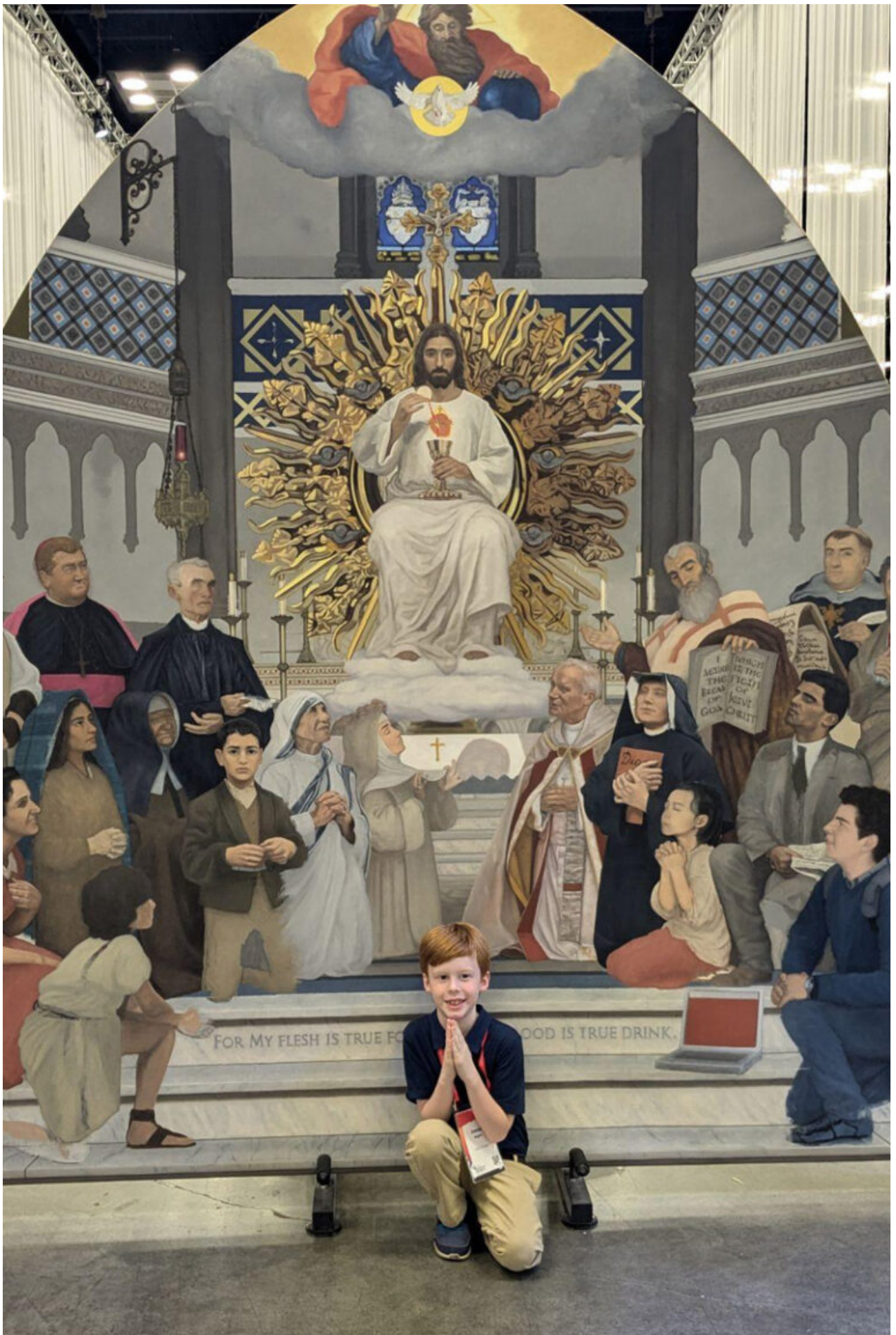


8-year-old deepens holy commitment after Indy event

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



FOR MY FLESH IS TRUE FOOD IS TRUE DRINK.



CONWAY — While in the adoration chapel at St. Joseph Church in Conway three years ago, Damian Rogers knelt in the pew and prayed aloud, saying, “Jesus, I love you; I adore you; I’m going to be a priest; and I want to go to heaven. Jesus, I’m going to pray the rosary every day, and I want to make sacrifices.”

It’s similar to what seminarians and priests share when recalling their discernment stories, with one striking difference — Damian Rogers was 5 years old at the time.

“I’ve said to many people you do catechesis in your home, but so many of these insights that he has seem to come from somewhere else,” said his mom, Jill Rogers. “He would just pray before the Blessed Sacrament, he would go and kneel on a step right in front of Jesus, and I would hear him say things like, ‘Jesus, I want to be your priest. And I want you to guide me.’”

“From a very early age, he seemed to understand the priesthood of Jesus Christ and that he would be a priest of Jesus and he would give his entire life over to Jesus and service to the Church.”

Now 8 years old, Damian, the middle of three children for Jimmy and Jill Rogers, parishioners of St. Joseph Church, remains committed to discerning God’s call. While still a typical boy — excitedly mentioning his favorite hobbies are to “play Legos and pray” — the Rogers family is taking his calling seriously.

Helping him discern as he grows helps drive the family’s spiritual decisions, from attending ordinations to the recent National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis, showing how families can be open to a child’s call to religious life.

“To have a child that seemingly has a vocation to the religious life in your home is overwhelming at times; it’s very humbling as well. But you want to help to nurture it. And so you’re constantly in prayer as how to do that,” Jill said.

Domestic Church

Jimmy and Jill Rogers have attended St. Joseph Church since the early 2000s, before they were married 15 years ago. From the beginning, creating the domestic church — building up the kingdom of God within the home — has been a priority for their family. The couple, along with their three children, Damian, Jackson, 10, and Mary, 5, pray the rosary daily, attend weekend

Mass, usually daily Mass and pray an adoration hour.

“I feel more of a calling to the priesthood. And I feel like Jesus wants me to spend more time with him praying. I feel calm,” Damian said of his time in adoration. “I talk to him about how I want to be a priest and how I want to be his servant.”

The family is also devoted to liturgical living, including celebrating feast days, saint devotions and incorporating a pilgrimage aspect into vacations. The children are homeschooled and are part of the Arkansas Catholic Homeschoolers co-op that meets at St. Jude Church in Jacksonville.

While their children have grown up with Catholicism woven into their daily lives, Damian has always been different, from how he makes the sign of the cross in Latin to being drawn to adoration.

“He’s an 8-year-old boy. So he can be pretty wild and crazy, stuff like that. But at other times, he can be very solemn and loving toward somebody. Or very solemn about something about Church, whether it’s Mass or if he hasn’t seen a priest in a while, he wants to go talk to or see that priest,” Jimmy said.

And his son doesn’t just talk about God and being in service. He is committed to sacrifices, like offering to serve in time-out in place of one of his siblings.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Rogers family was watching Mass by Bishop Robert Barron, founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, when Damian first mentioned his desire for the priesthood.

“He said, ‘Mommy, when I grow up, I want to be a priest.’ He said it with such conviction but also like a jubilation. You know you have those moments as a parent that really grab you and I saw it was very obviously from above,” Jill said.

The family emailed Bishop Robert Barron to share their story. Bishop Barron emailed back, saying, in part, “I know he’s only a little man, but the call to the priesthood is mysterious. ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,’ the Lord said to Jeremiah. When I was Damian’s age, I wanted to be a priest. I went through a number of changes and ups and downs, but that early conviction never fully left me – and it eventually led me to the seminary.”

For Damian, watching the Mass and God's call was just the movement of the Holy Spirit in his heart.

"It was just a feeling," he said.

Growing and discerning

Since realizing their son may have a religious calling, the couple makes sure to expose Damian and their other children to Catholic experiences related to religious life, including Holy Week Masses and the Diocese of Little Rock's annual Chrism Mass, where the chrism oil for ordinations are blessed. The family attends priestly ordinations, and Jill said Damian always emanates a joy "that you just couldn't fake."

Damian explained his favorite part of ordinations is when "the bishop consecrates the priest's hands with the chrism oil."

Damian said he's enjoyed meeting several priests, including one of his favorites, Father Taryn Whittington, administrator at St. Boniface Church in Bigelow (New Dixie) and St. Oscar Romero Catholic Community in Greenbrier.

"I like his homilies. I like how he does the Gospel and how he does the consecration," Damian said.

Even though discernment as an adult is critical to following a vocation, Father Whittington said many priests he's known have shared about feeling the call at a young age toward religious life.

"For a kid that age, it was remarkable how focused he is on the Blessed Sacrament and on the Eucharist," Father Whittington said of Damian.

In celebration of the Eucharistic Revival, Jill and the children attended a part of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage along the St. Juan Diego Route, stopping in Hanceville, Ala., at the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament June 20. The whole family attended the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis July 17-18, joining 60,000 other Catholics to celebrate

Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist.

Even before both events, Damian could see the spiritual connections between the revival and what would be unfolding across the country.

"We were driving to daily Mass, and we were talking about the pilgrimage and the four routes and how they would converge at the congress. And he said, 'Yes, well, it's like how we all come together at church into one body of Christ.' He was able to tie that all together," his mother said.

At the Eucharistic Congress, Damian kept busy waving and saying hello to all the priests who passed by.

"I want to become a priest when I grow up, so I just want to meet all the priests that I can," he said.



Damian Rogers, 8, prays and smiles at the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis. (Courtesy Jill Rogers)

Arkansans share determination after congress

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



The first National Eucharistic Congress in 83 years drew Arkansans to Indianapolis July 17-21.

More than 60,000 Catholics flocked to Lucas Oil Stadium to celebrate Mass in a host of languages, participate in activities and music and listen to some of well-known Catholic speakers.

Diane Hanley, a parishioner at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Little Rock, decided to attend the National Eucharistic Congress the moment she heard of it — while reading an article in *Arkansas Catholic* at the beginning of the three-year Eucharistic Revival.

“I love the Eucharist and wanted to honor Jesus by attending,” Hanley said. “I had been slightly aware of the International Congress back in 1976 ... At first, I thought this gathering

was going to be the same, but I later learned there has not been a National Eucharistic Congress in the U.S. since 1941. So that made this one a must-see event for my lifetime.”

Hanley, who attended with three friends, said it’s hard to pick a favorite part of the Congress because all of the different experiences came together to make “a beautiful mosaic.”

“The Shroud of Turin exhibit was profound, and the nightly Benediction filled my heart,” Hanley said. “The music was a perfect balance of praise and traditional Latin worship, with charismatic expression and even silence. The huge morning Masses were mind-boggling. In addition to the familiar ‘big name’ speakers we all love, I was stunned by the talk from Msgr. James Shea.

“One aspect that tied it all together was the joy and love shared by just being together with thousands of people who all love Jesus. Many people said it was like a taste of heaven, for that reason. All the fatigue and effort were being offered up to God, so complaints were minimal. Also, it was so encouraging to see the throngs of young vocations and large young families.”

After the Congress, Hanley said she is now more determined to live out her faith.

“I have more determination to be bold in speaking of God’s salvation, and especially of his gift to us in the Eucharist,” Hanley said. “Prayer and Mass are such a privilege. I feel personally beloved by Jesus, our Good Shepherd, and personally called to invite others to share his joy.”

Karen Taylor, a parishioner of St. Mary Church in Saint Vincent (Hattiesville), has been following the activities and plans for the Eucharistic Revival from the beginning.

“My interest started with an interview I watched on EWTN with Bishop (Andrew) Cozzens (from the Diocese of Crookston, Minn.),” Taylor said. “I read everything I could find about it on the internet, and when I heard about the Congress, I felt called to go.”

Taylor prayed about it, and eventually sent a group text to her children and grandchildren informing them of her pilgrimage plans. Her middle son Charlie and daughter-in-law Patricia Osborn of nearby Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton made all of the arrangements.

Taylor said she has renewed gratitude since returning home from the Congress.

“I plan to say, ‘Thank you’ to our pastors a lot more often and hope that others will do the same,” Taylor said.

Charlie said he enjoyed the early morning rosary at the Congress, followed by “the most beautiful Mass ever.”

“You could really feel the presence of Jesus throughout the entire Mass,” Charlie said. “This experience has led me to be a better member of my parish. I work a lot, (and) this conference has opened my eyes to how much respect I have for Father Hart and all the professional leaders at Sacred Heart. I need to do more!”

Mailelani Lessenberry, a parishioner of St. Bernard of Clairvaux Church in Bella Vista, attended the Congress with her mother, father and three siblings — brothers Noa, 16, and Kai, 13, and sister Alana, 10. The 17-year-old said her favorite part of the Congress was adoration.

“Every night during the Revival Sessions, we’d have about an hour of guided adoration in the Lucas Oil Stadium,” Lessenberry said. “It was an incredible experience. The music was amazing, and being in the stadium with 50,000-plus other Catholics, all adoring and worshipping the body, blood, soul and divinity of our Savior was something that I’ll never get to experience the same way again. It brought us all closer to Christ, and it was the highlight of my time at the Eucharistic Congress.”

“We wanted to attend the National Eucharistic Congress, because we wanted a family ‘vacation’ that would bring all of us closer to our faith,” said mom Jordyn Lessenberry. “If we never get to attend another Eucharistic Congress, this event will forever be the most important and significant experience I have ever attended.”

With the beginning of her freshman year at the University of Dallas right around the corner, Mailelani is more prepared than ever to start class.

“I actually plan on going to daily Mass and adoration as often as I can once I’m in college,” Lessenberry said. “There’s a chapel on campus, and I want to spend as much time there as possible to continue growing closer to Christ every day.”

Anna Woods, a parishioner of Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton, attended the Congress with her father, Deacon Richard Papini of Conway.

Woods said she never could have imagined just how the Congress would impact her.

“The Eucharistic procession through downtown Indianapolis was amazing,” Woods said. “Seeing all the seminarians, sisters, priest, bishops and then the Eucharist process in front of you and then you join in the Eucharistic procession that just kept going and going. We are still so thankful and blessed we could be a part of this. Rewatching all the Masses and listening to the speakers, you feel being right there all over again...”

Woods is renewed with determination to be a disciple in her parish.

“Going forward, (I will be) continuing our mission of discipleship, sharing the love of Jesus to all, especially those most in need of his mercy and living a Eucharistic life, committing to the ‘Walk with One,’ — trying to get a loved one or friend to return to Church this year...” Woods said.

Father Stephen Hart, pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton and St. Elizabeth Church in Oppelo, said he attended the congress because he felt called to help hear confessions.

“Even though logistically I didn’t have everything figured out until a few weeks beforehand, everything turned out great,” Father Hart said. “I was happy to represent our diocese and my brother priests.”

Father Hart said his favorite thing about event is the same as one of his favorite things to do as a priest: hearing confessions.

“Helping people reconcile themselves to God the Father and to his Church makes everything in me light up,” Father Hart said.

Now that he has returned to his parishes, Father Hart is already thinking of ways to bring what he learned at the Congress to life back at home.

“Sacred Heart recently hosted a ‘Theology on Tap’ at a local brewery, and I talked about my experience of the congress,” Father Hart said. “I also invited several other Catholics in our local area to share their impressions as well. As a pastor, I want to help our faithful take the ‘Walk with One’ idea seriously; if everyone found and accompanied just one person who has been away from our Eucharist, what a difference it would make.”



Mary Kay Scott, a parishioner of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Little Rock, stands outside Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, Ind. (Courtesy Diane Hanley)



(Left to right) Jeremy, Alana, Noa, Mailelani, Jordyn and Kai Lessenberry stand outside the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis, Ind. The family, from St. Bernard of Clairvaux in Bella Vista, made the pilgrimage together. (Courtesy of Mailelani Lessenberry)



Father Stephen Hart takes a photo of his point of view from his seat during the closing Mass July 21 at Lucas Oil Stadium. (Father Stephen Hart)



Karen Taylor, a parishioner of St. Mary Church in Saint Vincent (Hattiesville), shows off the T-shirt she bought at the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis after returning home Aug. 1. (Courtesy Karen Taylor)



Father Stephen Hart of Lake Village shows his view from the eucharistic procession July 20 during the National Eucharistic Congress. (Father Stephen Hart)

Congress sends forth Eucharistic missionaries

written by OSV News |



As five days of the National Eucharistic Congress concluded with one final revival and a solemn Mass in Lucas Oil Stadium, Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens of Crookston, Minn., board chairman of the National Eucharistic Congress Inc., stood in Lucas Oil Stadium.

“I have a question for you,” he told the crowd. “This is the 10th National Eucharistic Congress — do you think we should do an 11th one?”

Some 60,000 congress participants — representing 50 U.S. states, 17 countries, and various Eastern and Western churches, and speaking over 40 languages — cheered wildly in the stadium.

They also again rose to their feet to give the U.S. Catholic bishops an enthusiastic standing ovation for making possible the five-day congress with its impact sessions, breakout sessions, special events, revival nights with Eucharistic adoration and Benediction and beautifully celebrated reverent Masses.

The event reflected the diversity of a Church all united in the same Eucharistic Lord and eager to use their gifts for a new Pentecost in the Church.

The first day of the July 17-21 congress began with an evening revival as the 30 perpetual pilgrims, who had walked the four National Eucharistic Pilgrimage routes, took their final official steps of their eight-week journey into the stadium carrying icons of each route's respective patron saints — St. Juan Diego, St. Junipero Serra, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and the Blessed Virgin Mary — that were put around the altar where the Blessed Sacrament was placed.

“How will we know that we are experiencing Eucharistic revival?” Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the papal nuncio to the U.S., asked in his keynote speech July 17, encouraging everyone to surrender their hearts to the Lord over the next few days. “When we are truly revived by the Eucharist,” he said, “then our encounter with Christ’s real presence in the sacrament opens us to an encounter with him in the rest of our life” and then “spills over in our daily life, a life of relating to others, our way of seeing others.”

Every day of the congress began with most congress-goers joining in beautifully and reverently celebrated Eucharistic liturgies in the stadium — including a July 20 Holy Qurbana, the Syro-Malabar form of the Eucharistic liturgy, prayed in English. Additional morning and evening Masses at nearby sites in different languages, such as Spanish or Vietnamese, or in different forms, such as the Byzantine rite or the older usage of the Roman rite.

Tens of thousands of congress-goers at the revivals — and the liturgies as well — eagerly joined their voices in singing the hymns and chants, both traditional and contemporary, in English, Spanish, Latin and other languages. The congress saw the musicianship of Dave and Lauren Moore, Sarah Kroger and Matt Maher, as well as the talents of the men’s ensemble Floriani and the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra.

“The reverence was just awe-inspiring, and that’s something I would like to take back to our parish,” Deacon Robb Caputo of the Diocese of Peoria, Ill., told OSV News.

The nightly revival sessions created a sensory experience of awe around the Eucharistic Lord, as tens of thousands prayed in silent contemplation before the Eucharist on the altar — illuminated in the dark stadium by spotlights. Adoring Jesus in the stadium, concluding with Benediction, was the pinnacle movement of each evening.

Keynote speakers and testimonies helped keep people’s eyes fixed on Jesus’ personal love for them and his desire to be close to them.

One such nightly revival, focused on healing, indicated the problem with Catholic belief in the Eucharist — was more about the heart than the head, and needed Catholics to repent of their indifference to Jesus.

“Knowledge can make us great, but only love can make a saint,” said Father Mike Schmitz, the Diocese of Duluth, Minn., priest known for popular podcasts “The Bible in a Year” and “The Catechism in a Year.” Mother Olga of the Sacred Heart, who survived four wars in the Middle East, recounted how in the midst of her own personal suffering, she heard Jesus say in her heart: “That even on the cross and through the cross, we can still choose to love.”

Jonathan Roumie, the actor famous for his portrayal of Jesus in “The Chosen,” told the audience at the final revival night July 20 after reading Jesus’ Bread of Life discourse from John 6, “The Eucharist for me is healing. The Eucharist for me is peace, the Eucharist for me is my grounding. The Eucharist for me is his heart within me.”

Congress organizers also made intentional efforts to be inclusive of families and those with disabilities, particularly those with sensory disorders, so they could also experience the congress and participate fully in the experience.

Throughout the congress, the historic and stately St. John Church across from the Indiana Convention Center's main entrance fulfilled its role as a spiritual hub. A steady flow of pilgrims came and went from the main church during 24-hour adoration throughout the congress. It had times for silence as well as times geared toward families, where children were invited to get close to the Eucharist, put a flower in a vase near the monstrance, and just adore as beautiful, simple melodies lifted up the packed church in prayer.

More than 1,200 religious sisters and brothers, 1,170 priests, 630 deacons, 610 seminarians and 200 bishops participated in the congress, according to congress organizers. At a press conference July 19, Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez said he had never seen anything like the congress, as a non-papal event, in his 35 years of priesthood.

"You can sense the energy of what's happening here, which is touching hearts," he said, adding the experience was making him think about how to respond to the need for the Church's sacraments to be more accessible.

The highlight came July 20 as tens of thousands of Catholics followed behind the truck-pulled, flower-rimmed float carrying the Blessed Sacrament accompanied by Bishop Cozzens and Indianapolis Archbishop Charles C. Thompson. They walked 10 blocks from the convention center through downtown Indianapolis to the Indiana War Memorial Plaza for what Bishop Cozzens said "might be the largest Eucharistic procession in the country in decades."

At the sending-forth Mass July 21, Pope Francis' special envoy to the congress, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, delivered a homily with warmth, joy and humor that made participants both laugh and feel inspired as he told them, "A Eucharistic people is a missionary and evangelizing people."

"We should not keep Jesus to ourselves," he said, exhorting them not to use their time in church to escape others, but to "share Jesus' tender love" with "the weary, the hungry and suffering ... the lost, confused and weak."

"Go and share Jesus' gift of reconciliation and peace to those who are divided," he said, emphasizing, "Let us proclaim Jesus joyfully and zealously for the life of the world!"

Bella Vista Catholics plan pilgrimage

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



As thousands of American Catholics travel to Indianapolis for the National Eucharistic Congress July 17-21, one northwest Arkansas parish has grown even closer by planning its own pilgrimage.

St. Bernard Church in Bella Vista plans to send 18 pilgrims from their parish and other parishes in the state to the first National Eucharistic Congress since 1941.

Parishioner Peggy Siefert said the adventure started in June 2023 with a simple question: “Do you know if anyone is planning a trip to the National Eucharistic Congress?”

“We have a group of people that regularly attend daily Mass at St. Bernard,” Siefert said. “And several of the couples and individuals there are involved in a lot of different activities in the parish and usually know quite a bit about what’s going on. I just happened to ask one of the couples after Mass one day, ‘Hey, do you know if anyone is planning a trip to the National Eucharistic Congress?’ And they said, well, we haven’t heard, but we could ask the Men’s Club or the Knights of Columbus and see if anyone has planned anything.”

Siefert and several other parishioners approached Dean Mechels, a parishioner and Knight of Columbus who has organized several trips for the parish. Mechels used to own a bus company and was familiar with the ins and outs of planning large church trips.

Mechels said that while he was retired, he was more than happy to help parishioners as St. Bernard planned its trip.

“He sat down and did a little bit of research and pulled together information about where to stay and got us a hotel in Indianapolis and organized a bus for us,” Siefert said. “Then he handed me all of that awesome foundation for a trip,” in July 2023.

Jeff Hines, director of the diocese’s Office of Faith Formation, said the diocese decided to allow

parishes to plan their pilgrimages and events for the Revival.

“Early in the Eucharistic Revival, Bishop (Anthony B.) Taylor asked the diocese to emphasize the Eucharistic Revival at the local level, in parishes where Christ is present and accessible to everyone,” Hines said. “For this reason, the diocese is not organizing a trip but encouraging everyone to participate in their parish.”

Siefert said parishioners began advertising their pilgrimage in the fall of 2023 at Mass, in the bulletin and with posters across northwest Arkansas to gauge interest. Finally, 18 Catholics — 15 from St. Bernard and the other three from other parishes across the state and Texas — signed up.

With 40 people needed to fill a bus, the pilgrims were undeterred — they’ll be carpooling to Indianapolis instead.

Congress organizers encouraged pilgrims to buy their tickets by December 2023 since thousands of pilgrims are expected. Siefert said the group reserved hotel rooms in fall 2023 in Troy, Ill. After staying overnight, the pilgrims will take a guided tour of the Cathedral Basilica in St. Louis, attend Mass and drive the rest of the way to Indianapolis.

Another pilgrim from St. Bernard is Linda White, who is converting to Catholicism and began attending St. Bernard two years ago.

“Since that time, I’ve just become more and more enamored with the Catholic Church,” she said. “I’m waiting for an annulment to go through, and so here I am, going to a Eucharistic conference, and I’m not going to be able to participate in the Eucharist,” White said with a laugh. “But that’s all right. I’m there, and I believe in taking the Eucharist spiritually. I’m just biding my time and waiting. I’ve learned so much and made so many great friends through this church that I’m really excited about it.”

Like Siefert, White is excited for the music and speakers, many of whom are authors whose works she’s read and loved.

“I think it’s going to be great fellowship with the other parishioners I’ve come to know, as well as 50,000 other people that you’ll run into during the different talks and things we’ll be participating in,” White said.

To help prepare, White said she enjoyed watching “The Veil Removed,” a short film that emphasizes the importance of the Eucharist and has recommended it to everyone she has visited with since. She hopes the conference will lead more Catholics to believe in the Real Presence of the Eucharist.

Pilgrim Pat Constantine always thought pilgrimages were interesting but often too long or expensive.

“So when this came about, I thought, you know what? This is my pilgrimage. What better pilgrimage can you have than the Eucharist itself,” she said. “So that’s why I really wanted to do this and help deepen my faith.”

Constantine has felt her parish grow closer in the weeks and months leading up to the pilgrimage.

"I think it's brought us closer together, because all of us understand more what it's all about, and we're getting excited about doing it together and not feeling alone," she said. "I'm hoping and praying that once this is over and we've come back that we can help, even those that couldn't go ... and to bring back what we learned there."

Catholic photographer makes pilgrimage to Little Rock

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



Andrew Masi had never been to Arkansas before June 9. With his visit, Masi is one step closer to reaching his goal of photographing every Catholic cathedral and basilica in the United States.

'Amazing' encounters reported on Eucharistic pilgrimage

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



As a Eucharistic procession made its way May 28 through Victoria, Texas, a 20-something man sitting on the side of a street caught Charlie McCullough's attention.

McCullough stopped to talk with him, explaining what was going on: The procession was part of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage en route to Indianapolis for the National Eucharistic Congress, and the Eucharist they were walking behind is really, truly Jesus.

"He had grown up in the Protestant faith and had never seen a Eucharistic procession before and was at a time in life where he was asking a lot of big questions about what is the reason I exist for, what's the purpose of life, all these things," McCullough, one of six perpetual pilgrims on the pilgrimage's southern St. Juan Diego route, recalled May 29. "We talked briefly and I kept walking."

About five blocks later, McCullough looked over his shoulder and saw the man running after the procession. He caught up to McCullough and asked if they could talk more.

"He told me that that morning was the first time he had tried to pray in years. He opened his Bible, and he didn't know if the Lord had heard him. And when we walked by — when Jesus Christ walked by — he knew something was different. And he knew that he wanted to follow the Lord, and he had so many questions about how and what he wants to do, and there was this zeal welling up in his heart," McCullough said. "I just got to pray with him and encourage him."

"At the end of our conversation, he goes, 'I know this sounds crazy, but I want to go all the way to Indianapolis,'" he said.

McCullough shared that encounter on a May 29 media call that included pilgrims from all four routes of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage, which began May 18-19 in California, Connecticut, Minnesota and Texas. Ten days into their journeys, the 23 perpetual pilgrims

were in the Diocese of Victoria; the Diocese of Boise, Idaho; the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis; and the Diocese of Trenton, N.J.

Their second week included already iconic events — such as when Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York blessed the city with the Eucharist from a boat near the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor May 27 — and hidden moments — like when a man got out of a truck in the middle of Oregon, far away from any towns, and genuflected as the Eucharistic caravan passed.

"It was just a moment driving by, but he had gone out that distance to make sure he knew he would be by Jesus," said Chas Firestone East, a perpetual pilgrim from Virginia journeying on the western St. Junipero Serra Route.

The pilgrims shared other stories of encounter and conversion: On the California side of Lake Tahoe, a photographer for a secular news outlet — amazed by the masses of people turning out for processions — told the perpetual pilgrims that he was inspired to learn more about the Eucharist and plans to begin the process for becoming Catholic. Meanwhile, a woman who isn't able to walk with the pilgrims has been joining each procession along the St. Juan Diego Route since Brownsville, Texas, on a retrofitted tricycle. Also in Texas, some perpetual pilgrims helped bandage a woman's wounded leg at a homeless shelter, and then the woman — whose name is Hope — asked the pilgrims to pray with her.

"It was just a beautiful moment to see Jesus ... getting to see him inside the person that we encounter," said Shayla Elm, a Juan Diego Route perpetual pilgrim originally from North Dakota.

Adore Jesus' real presence, pope tells U.S. Catholics

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



VATICAN CITY — Catholics need to recover a sense of awe and adoration before the Eucharist, knowing that it is "the real and loving presence of the Lord," Pope Francis told members of the committees organizing the National Eucharistic Revival and the National Eucharistic Congress in the United States.

Jesus spoke of himself as "the living bread which came down from heaven, the true bread that gives life to the world," the pope told the group June 19, just three days after leaving the hospital following abdominal surgery.

"This morning, while I was celebrating the Eucharist, I thought about this a lot because it is what gives us life," the pope said. "Indeed, the Eucharist is God's response to the deepest hunger of the human heart, the hunger for authentic life because in the Eucharist Christ himself is truly in our midst to nourish, console and sustain us on our journey."

Pope Francis walked into the library using his cane instead of a wheelchair. And although he sat when he read his prepared text — and added spontaneous comments — he stood to bless the four-foot-tall monstrance, paten and chalice that will be used during the eucharistic congress in Indianapolis July 17-21, 2024.

The group was led by Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens of Crookston, Minn., chair of the U.S. bishops' advisory group for the National Eucharistic Revival, a multi-year process aimed at renewing and strengthening faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and chair of the board of directors planning the eucharistic congress.

Bishop Cozzens told Catholic News Service it was "an incredible privilege" to meet the pope and experience "his love, his passion for the Eucharist and for the work that we're about."

Pope Francis told the group that, unfortunately, today many Catholics "believe that the Eucharist is more a symbol than the reality of the Lord's presence and love."

But, he said, "it is more than a symbol; it is the real and loving presence of the Lord."

"It is my hope, then, that the eucharistic congress will inspire Catholics throughout the country to discover anew the sense of wonder and awe at the Lord's great gift of himself," he said, "and to spend time with him in the celebration of the holy Mass and in personal prayer and adoration before the Blessed Sacrament."

Pope Francis lamented that many people "have lost the sense of adoration. We need to regain the sense of adoring in silence, adoration. It is a prayer we have lost; few people know what this is, and you bishops need to catechize the faithful on the prayer of adoration," he said, looking at Bishop Cozzens and Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, who also accompanied the group.

The pope insisted on the link between celebrating Mass, eucharistic adoration and sharing the Gospel with others.

"In the Eucharist, we encounter the one who gave everything for us, who sacrificed himself in order to give us life, who loved us to the end," he said. "We become credible witnesses to the joy and transforming beauty of the Gospel only when we recognize that the love we celebrate in this sacrament cannot be kept to ourselves but demands to be shared with all."

"This is the sense of mission: You go, you celebrate Mass, you take Communion, you go to adoration — and afterward?" he asked. "Afterward you go out, you go out and evangelize; Jesus makes us this way."

"The Eucharist impels us to a strong and committed love of neighbor," he insisted. "For we cannot truly understand or live the meaning of the Eucharist if our hearts are closed to our brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor, suffering, weary or may have gone astray in life."

Speaking off the cuff, the pope said those who believe in the Eucharist must reach out to and visit "the elderly, who are the wisdom of a people, and the sick, who take the form of the suffering Jesus."

Pope Francis prayed that the National Eucharistic Congress would "bear fruit in guiding men and women throughout your nation to the Lord who, by his presence among us, rekindles hope and renews life."

In an interview with CNS following the papal audience, Bishop Cozzens said the ongoing process of the Synod of Bishops on synodality and the eucharistic revival are related since, in the listening sessions for the synod, many Catholics expressed concern about a lack of belief in the real presence and about declining Mass attendance.

"We're probably at an all-time low in the United States in terms of the percentage of Catholics who are actually going to Mass every Sunday," he said, which is "a huge concern that came forward in the synod process."

The listening sessions also pleaded with the bishops to work for the unity of the church in the country and draw everyone together around the sacrament of unity, and communion is the best way to do that, he said. "So, I would argue that the synodal process helped us build the whole thing."

"The Eucharist is the source of our life in the Church," the bishop said. "It's the beating heart of the Church where we receive the life of Christ as the body of Christ."

Pilgrimage leads Catholics across U.S. to 2024 congress

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



See a larger version of the pilgrimage map.

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Mike Wavra thinks of the 2024 National Eucharistic Pilgrimage as "an opportunity to walk with the Lord."

He and his wife Cindi, both 65-year-old retirees, plan to join the pilgrimage at its northern launch point in Minnesota in May 2024, and then walk for about a week before rejoining the pilgrims seven weeks later in Indianapolis for the 10th National Eucharistic Congress.

The Wavras are among thousands of Catholics from across the United States anticipated to participate in next year's pilgrimage to the Congress, part of the U.S. bishops' three-year National Eucharistic Revival that began in 2021. The pilgrimage has four routes, with beginnings in the north, south, east and west of the country.

Pilgrims traveling in the "Eucharistic caravans" on all four routes will begin their journeys with Pentecost weekend celebrations May 17-18, 2024, leaving May 19. They will all converge on Indianapolis July 16, 2024, the day before the five-day Congress opens.

The pilgrimage is an opportunity for prayer and evangelization, as well as a way to engage Catholics unable to attend the Congress, said Tim Glemkowski, the National Eucharistic Congress' executive director.

"What the pilgrimage does is it builds us in prayerful anticipation for what God is going to do at the Congress," he told OSV News May 5. "It's two months of us pilgrimaging, fasting, praying, interceding, asking the Lord to renew his church, his bride, in those five days. ... They're not two different things. It's one pilgrimage: five days of which happen in a stadium in Indianapolis, and two months of which happen across our country on the way there."

Weekend stops in major cities will include special liturgies, Eucharistic adoration, processions and service opportunities, Glemkowski said.

The northern "Marian Route" that the Wavras plan to take begins in northern Minnesota at Lake Itasca, the headwaters of the Mississippi River. The route follows the river to St. Paul and Minneapolis, its first weekend stop. Then the route heads south to Rochester, Minnesota, and then east through La Crosse and Green Bay, Wis. It continues through Milwaukee, Chicago and Notre Dame, Ind., before arriving in Indianapolis.

The "Juan Diego Route" begins more than 1,600 miles south of Lake Itasca in Brownsville, Texas, at the U.S.-Mexico border. It will follow Texas' eastern border through Corpus Christi and Houston, and continue through New Orleans; Mobile, Alabama; Atlanta; Nashville, Tennessee; and Louisville, Kentucky.

The "Seton Route" — named for St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first U.S.-born saint — begins in New Haven, Conn., and continues through New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington and Pittsburgh, then Steubenville, Columbus and Cincinnati, Ohio.

The "Junipero Serra Route" begins in San Francisco — with hope of walking over the Golden Gate Bridge — and continues through Reno, Nev.; Salt Lake City; Denver; North Platte and Omaha, Neb.; Kansas City, Kan. and Mo.; and St. Louis.

At more than 2,200 miles long, the Junipero Serra Route is the longest and most rigorous route. Pilgrims will use transport to cross sections of their route, but some of the Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains are expected to be crossed on foot. In an interview with Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens of Crookston, Minn., for a February episode of the popular podcast "Catholic Stuff You Should Know," co-host Father John Nepil said he wanted to walk with the Eucharist and fellow priests in the Rockies over the highest elevation the pilgrimage routes will reach.

Besides the thrill of the physical challenge, "there's always been a close connection for me between thinking of the Eucharist as the source and summit of our faith, and the ways we reflect on the Eucharistic high points as a place of transcendence, and then the way it connects to the mountains," Father Nepil, a priest of the Archdiocese of Denver and vice rector of St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver, told OSV News May 8.

Modern Catholic Pilgrim, a pilgrimage nonprofit with offices in Minnesota and California, is organizing the national pilgrimage. Its founder and president, Will Peterson, connects the pilgrimage to the scriptural journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus, where two of his disciples met Jesus after the Resurrection. Luke 24 recounts how Jesus comforted them, and then revealed himself in the breaking of the bread.

The routes include important Catholic sites in the United States, such the 18th-century ministry of St. Junipero Serra in what is now California, the Philadelphia tombs of St. John Neumann and St. Katharine Drexel, and in Wisconsin, the National Shrine of Our Lady of Champion, the only approved Marian apparition in the United States.

"People are going to reach an 'Emmaus point' at these spots along the way, and we want to support the local church," Peterson said May 9. "That's where it's such a great gift to coordinate with like 65 dioceses to say, 'How can we really highlight the great sacred sites of your diocese?'"

Each pilgrimage route is expected to have 12 "perpetual pilgrims," young adults, including two seminarians, committed to traveling the entire route, from their launch points to Indianapolis. Each route also will include priest chaplains who will carry the Eucharist, usually in a monstrance specially designed for the pilgrimage. While some chaplains may join the entire pilgrimage route, others may join for segments of the journey, Glemkowski said.

The faithful are invited to join the pilgrimage for hours, days or weeks. Each day of the pilgrimage will begin with Mass and a Eucharistic procession with the local community before pilgrims continue the trek to their next stopping point. Pilgrims joining the Eucharistic caravans for short stretches will be responsible for arranging their own food and overnight accommodations, although some parishes along the routes may provide meals and lodging.

Parishioners of St. Bernard Parish in Thief River Falls, Minn., the Wavras have worked out their own logistics: They plan to take their truck with a camper and two motorized bicycles, and "hopscoch" their way along the route, taking their truck each morning to drop off their bikes at that evening's stop, driving back, walking the pilgrimage route, and then taking their bikes to pick up their truck.

The Wavras expect the pilgrimage to include camaraderie with fellow Catholics and their bishop, Bishop Cozzens, whose Diocese of Crookston is home to Lake Itasca and the first stretch of the Marian Route. Bishop Cozzens is chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, which is overseeing the revival.

The pilgrimage "brings Jesus out of our churches and out into the public," Mike Wavra told OSV News May 4. "This is just an opportunity for people to see the Jesus that we know and love."

Wavra also expects the pilgrimage to attract interest and curiosity from non-Catholics. "They wonder what some crazy Catholics are doing, following a piece of bread," he said. "It's not a piece of bread, it's the Lord himself. What an opportunity for us to share that."

USCCB Eucharistic Revival starts on feast

of Corpus Christi

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



USCCB's three-year event hopes to spawn healing, unity, conversion