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Troubled Irish church hosts congress

by Catholic News Service by NCR Staff



People pray during eucharistic adoration at the 50th International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin June 12. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Dublin saw thousands of pilgrims from all over the world at this year's 50th International Eucharistic Congress, a gathering to celebrate the Eucharist. The Congress opened June 10 against a backdrop of anger over the clerical abuse scandals in Ireland as well as declining Mass attendance and a more aggressively secular culture, but with congress participants hopeful that the future will be brighter.

An estimated 25,000 pilgrims participated each day, according to the 50th International Eucharistic Congress 2012 website.

Tom O'Sullivan of Belfast, Northern Ireland, said the congress was "allowing the silent majority of the country to come together and share their love for the Eucharist and the Mass." He said he had been heartened and felt his spirits lifted by participating in the events.

Many of those young people attending or volunteering at the International Eucharistic Congress cite World Youth Day as a primary influence in the development of their faith. Many are affiliated with

groups such as Youth 2000, Catholic Youth Care, Taizé or gospel choirs.

Eimear Felle, a 27-year-old Dubliner volunteered at the congress because she "received so much from" the two recent World Youth Days she attended.

She links her decision to volunteer to her understanding of the Eucharist.

"When a man came to my parish to talk about the congress and the need for volunteers, I didn't have to think twice about volunteering -- after all, the Eucharist is about sharing," she said.

Pope Benedict XVI, who addressed the event via a pre-recorded video message, paid tribute to Ireland's long history of faith.

Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, addressing an estimated 80,000 pilgrims at the closing Mass of the congress June 17, said that Irish Catholics' deep desire to strengthen their faith must form the basis of a radical new evangelization.

Dublin's Croke Park was transformed into a large open-air cathedral, with pilgrims filling the stadium and pitch area for the June 17 Mass celebrated by Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, the pope's representative to the congress and the head of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops. Ouellet later met with Irish victims of church-related child abuse during a pilgrimage to Lough Derg in County Donegal June 12 and 13.

Irish President Michael D. Higgins, Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny and Northern Ireland's Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness attended the Mass.

Nearly 180 pilgrims present at the Mass had participated in the 1932 International Eucharistic Congress, the last time the event was held in Ireland.

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Quebec held the congress in 2008, and the next one will be in Cebu, Philippines, in 2016. Other than the daily celebration of the Eucharist, the congress also holds workshops and events throughout its eight-day run, with themes for each day.

Some describe it as World Youth Day for people of all ages, according to the congress website. The pope chooses the location, according to the website, and the location selected is "usually in response to some pastoral need that has been identified in the place that has been chosen."

Referring to Ireland's clerical abuse crisis, Benedict said in his pre-recorded address, "Thankfulness and joy at such a great history of faith and love have recently been shaken in an appalling way by the revelation of sins committed by priests and consecrated persons against people entrusted to their care.

"How are we to explain the fact that people who regularly received the Lord's body and confessed their sins in the sacrament of penance have offended in this way?" he asked. "It remains a mystery. Yet evidently, their Christianity was no longer nourished by joyful encounter with Jesus Christ: It had become merely a matter of habit."

In the past few years, a series of independent inquiries uncovered decades of abuse and cover-ups of sexual abuse within the Irish church and in church-run institutions. One judicial report accused the

Vatican of being 'entirely unhelpful' to Irish bishops trying to deal with abuse.

Irish Cardinal Seán Brady told pilgrims he was ashamed that the church had failed to respond properly to abuse allegations.

'May God forgive us for the times when we, as individuals and as a church, failed to seek out and care for those little ones who were frightened, alone and in pain because someone was abusing them,' he said June 14.

Referring to a large healing stone at the front of the altar to commemorate the victims of clerical abuse, Brady prayed that 'one day this stone might become a symbol of conversion, healing and hope.'

On the day devoted to reconciliation, Richard Moore, who was blinded as a child in 1972 when he was shot in the face by a British soldier in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, reflected on the importance of reconciliation in his own life. Moore said that, despite his ordeal, he 'never had a moment's anger or a moment's bitterness.' He recounted how he met and forgave the soldier decades later.

Speaking to Catholic News Service, he said 'the power of prayer' sustained him and allowed him to forgive.

'There is so much that is good in the church that I experience on a daily basis,' he said.

'Things need to change in the church; there needs to be a lot more honesty and a lot more openness, but I am hopeful for the future of the church,' he said.

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