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Hundreds of local Catholics processed with the Blessed Sacrament carried by Archbishop Shelton Fabre of Louisville, Kentucky, July 9 on the Louisville ramp to the Big Four Bridge. The bridge for pedestrians and cyclists connects Louisville to Jeffersonville, Indiana. The procession marked the end of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage's July 4-9 route through the Louisville Archdiocese. (OSV News/The Record/Marnie McAllister)



by Brian Fraga

Staff Reporter

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After almost three years of planning and scores of local eucharistic conferences, holy hours, processions and other related events, the U.S. Catholic bishops' plan to revitalize the church in the United States will reach its climactic point this week in Indianapolis.

More than 50,000 people will descend on the Circle City for the 10th National Eucharistic Congress, a five-day gathering (June 17-21) that will feature liturgies, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, processions, musical and dramatic performances, panel discussions and individual presentations on various topics related to the Eucharist and its connection to the Catholic Church's evangelizing mission.

Organizers are counting on the National Eucharistic Congress to be an event that will fan the flames of spiritual revival in the U.S. church. Others are doubtful that the bishops' plan to promote a devotional form of Catholicism will win back Catholics alienated from the church for a variety of reasons.

While the congress will be flavored in large part by the kind of conservative Catholicism associated with Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, and featured on the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), the event will have crosscurrents of other Catholic sensibilities as a handful of speakers and exhibitors will present their own understandings of what obligations a eucharistic-based spirituality places on Catholics.



Priests, seminarians and faithful from the Diocese of Steubenville, Ohio, kneel and pray the rosary on the Wellsburg Bridge in West Virginia as a sternwheeler carrying the Eucharist passes below on the Ohio River. (OSV News/The Catholic Spirit/Colleen Rowan)

For example, peace activist [Martha Hennessy](#), the granddaughter of Catholic Worker co-founder Dorothy Day, was originally not invited to speak but will now deliver a keynote speech June 19 at the Indiana Convention Center. Hennessy [told Black Catholic Messenger](#) that her message will echo that of her famous grandmother's 1976 anti-war reflections at the 41st International Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia.

[Gloria Purvis](#), the author and podcast host whose show on EWTN radio was [canceled](#) in 2020 after she spoke out forcefully for racial justice in the wake of George Floyd's murder, will speak during the congress' July 21 evening revival session in Lucas Oil Stadium.

Speaking at the same forum will be Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, Bishop Robert Barron, the founder of the Word on Fire media ministry who in recent years has increasingly attacked ["wokeness" and critical race theory](#).

Dozens of other high-profile Catholic personalities are slated to appear as [emcees and keynote speakers](#), including Fr. Michael Schmitz, host of the popular "The Bible in a Year" podcast, and Jonathan Roumie, the actor who plays Jesus on "[The Chosen](#)" television series.

Several leading bishops and prelates are expected to participate in the congress. They include Cardinals Blase Cupich of Chicago and Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston; Archbishops Gustavo García-Siller of San Antonio and Nelson Jesus Pérez of Philadelphia; and Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the Vatican's ambassador to the United States, among others.



Children pray during eucharistic adoration at St. Laurence Church in Sugar Land, Texas, May 30. More than 1,200 faithful gathered at the church, one of several stops in the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese along the St. Juan Diego Route of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage. (OSV News/Texas Catholic Herald/James Ramos)

A replica of the Shroud of Turin will be on display, as will relics from several well-known saints and an exhibit about eucharistic miracles.

In between morning liturgies and evening "revival" sessions in Lucas Oil Stadium, congress-goers will have the opportunity to attend breakout sessions on topics ranging from eucharistic theology and service projects to presentations on controversial topics pertaining to abortion and gender dysphoria.

Since May, four groups of young adult Catholics have been walking to Indianapolis from different regions of the country while accompanying the Eucharist. They will converge in the stadium for the event's opening ceremony, which will feature a procession culminating in Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minnesota, entering the arena with a massive monstrance created specifically for the congress.

By the time Cardinal Luis Tagle, the [papal delegate](#) to the event, celebrates the closing Mass on July 21, organizers say they will have raised and spent more than \$22 million for a gathering that they hope will serve as a catalyst to energize Catholics across the United States.



Tim Glemkowski (CNS/Courtesy of Eucharistic Congress/Holly Freeman)

"I think this is the Lord trying to say to us, 'Come back to my heart, and then we're going to go on mission,' " said Tim Glemkowski, chief executive officer of National Eucharistic Congress Inc., a nonprofit the bishops established in 2022 to organize the July congress.

Glemkowski told NCR that he believes the National Eucharistic Congress, the centerpiece of the bishops' three-year National Eucharistic Revival, is a response to God's desire to renew the U.S. Catholic Church, which has been beset by polarization and scandal, not to mention the fact that scores of Catholics [fell away from the church](#) amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"There's a vital connection between a relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist, and mission. And the great saints display that in their life," said Glemkowski, who mentioned Teresa of Calcutta, Francis of Assisi and Dorothy Day as examples of those who were moved by eucharistic devotion to serve the poor, hungry and suffering.

While Glemkowski and organizers are counting on the National Eucharistic Congress to be a turning point for the church in the United States, one that will launch a critical "[Year of Mission](#)" for the ongoing eucharistic revival, critics see the congress as a high-priced example of the U.S. bishops' [apparent disconnect](#) from the vast majority of lay Catholics.

"Frankly, I'm skeptical that this is the best strategy to revitalize the church," said Jesuit Fr. John Baldovin, a professor of historical and liturgical theology at the Boston College Clough School of Theology and Ministry.



The National Eucharistic Pilgrimage arrived in the Diocese of St. Cloud, Minnesota, May 22. The second stop included a procession around the block in front of Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Gilman. (OSV News/The Central Minnesota Catholic/Dianne Towalski)

Baldovin is among the observers of U.S. Catholicism who believe that the bishops would have better spent their money by focusing on improving the quality of preaching, music and liturgy at the local parish level. They are skeptical that promoting traditional piety and devotional practices such as eucharistic adoration are what will renew a church that is deeply divided [along partisan lines](#) and operating under the dark cloud of the clergy sexual abuse crisis.

The belief that fostering eucharistic piety can cure those divisions is "certainly a view in the church today," Baldovin said. "It's no secret the church in this country is somewhat divided. But the bishops have put their money on a certain side of the church, by and large."

Baldovin and other Catholic scholars and theologians also criticize the bishops for organizing an initiative that they argue presents a limited view of the Eucharist, one that they say is detached from its communal dimension in the liturgy by focusing instead on personal pious devotions that only appeal to certain Catholics.

"It's not just the devotional style, for which there should be room in the church, but it's a focus that seems to be disconnected from other eucharistic church themes," said [Massimo Faggioli](#), a theologian and church historian at Villanova University.



Massimo Faggioli (CNS/Chaz Muth)

The congress' speaker lineup and breakthrough sessions, observers note, feature several Catholic apologists, authors, religious, academics and others connected to conservative Catholic groups and organizations such as Franciscan University of Steubenville, the Napa Institute, and [EWTN](#), the conservative Catholic media conglomerate that will be televising and livestreaming the event.

"If you look at the list of speakers, there aren't many people like me," Baldwin said. "That's quite clear and it's obviously deliberate."

The congress' major sponsors include leading conservative-leaning Catholic groups like the Augustine Institute, the Knights of Columbus, Our Sunday Visitor, as well as Legatus, [Word on Fire](#) and the [Fellowship of Catholic University Students](#).

Faggioli told NCR that he believes the bishops' National Eucharistic Revival speaks to "a certain culture" in the U.S. church and episcopacy, but fails to connect with other Catholic liturgical and theological sensibilities.

"It seems to be disconnected if not an alternative to synodality," Faggioli said.

"There is a rich theological tradition on the Eucharist and synodality, which needs a rooting in the tradition and ecumenism, but also in contemporary theology."

The suggestion that the U.S. bishops have spearheaded a eucharistic initiative that could be seen as an alternative, if not a competing project, to synodality, which Pope Francis has said is what God expects of the church in the third millennium, rankles organizers who argue that the two initiatives are intimately linked.

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"It's hard for me to wrap my head fully around the idea that the two are in conflict somehow," said Glemkowski, who coordinated the synodal process for the Denver Archdiocese during the local consultative phase of the 2021-24 [Synod of Bishops on synodality](#).

Pierre, the Vatican ambassador to the United States, [described](#) what he saw as a complementarity between the bishops' eucharistic revival and synodality when he [addressed](#) the U.S. bishops at their [spring plenary assembly](#) in Louisville, Kentucky.

"We have set out on this Eucharistic Revival because we want our people to come to a renewed and deeper appreciation of Christ's presence in the Eucharist," said Pierre, who added that Francis has "several times" urged Catholics to recover the practice of eucharistic adoration.

The pope himself blessed the monstrance and a chalice that will be used for the congress' closing Mass. In welcoming the event's organizing committee during a [June 2023 private audience](#) in the Vatican, Francis said he hoped the congress would "inspire Catholics throughout the country to discover anew the sense of wonder and awe of the Lord's great gift of himself."



Pope Francis blesses a 4-foot-tall monstrance, a chalice and a paten as Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minnesota, looks on during an audience in the library of the Apostolic Palace June 19, 2023. The blessing took place during the pope's meeting with members of the organizing committees of the U.S. National Eucharistic Congress and Eucharistic Revival. (CNS screenshot/Vatican Media)

Glemkowski said the idea for the revival and congress emerged from synodal-style listening sessions with lay leaders and Catholic religious men and women in 2021, a time during which the U.S. bishops also had [an active working group](#) to study the possibility of drafting a document that would have barred Catholic politicians who support abortion rights — such as President Joe Biden — from receiving the Eucharist.

Biden's election in November 2020 prompted the bishops' conference to form that working group, which ended up producing a [compromise document](#) that summarized church teachings on the Eucharist and that [some criticized](#) for reflecting theological views that predated the Second Vatican Council. That document, "[The Mystery of](#)

[the Eucharist in the Life of the Church](#)," has been used as a resource for the bishops' Eucharistic Revival.

At the same November 2021 plenary where they approved that document, the bishops voted to launch the National Eucharistic Congress. The move was also partly a response to an oft-cited and [maligned](#) 2019 Pew Research Center [survey](#) that indicated about one-third of U.S. Catholics believed in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

The bishops subsequently commissioned a new survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, which in 2022 [found](#) that while 64% of Catholics said they believed in the Real Presence, only 17% attended Mass on a regular basis.



Pilgrims kneel for benediction in Rosedale Park in Kansas City, Kansas, as the St. Junipero Serra Route of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage processed along various stretches of Mission Road in the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas, June 28, playing on the theme "Mission." (OSV News/Megan Marley)

The bishops believe that emphasizing the Real Presence is a key element to reinvigorating Mass attendance, but observers like Baldovin from Boston College say the bishops are putting the wrong emphasis on the Catholic Church's eucharistic theology.

"The Eucharist is better understood as a verb than as a noun," Baldovin said. "It's an encounter with a person who forms and unites the people who go out into the world. The purpose is becoming Christ for the world. That's not to say that [congress organizers] are denying that, but my criticism would be that they're not making it the main focus, which it should be."

When discussing how to bolster eucharistic belief and practice, Glemkowski said participants in the early synodal-style listening sessions that led to the National Eucharistic Revival suggested that the bishops were uniquely positioned to gather the U.S. church together by convening a national eucharistic congress, which had not been held in the United States since June 1941 in Minnesota.

In his presentations to the U.S. bishops' conference, Cozzens — who has been the bishops' point man for the Eucharistic Revival and congress — has described the revival as a "bishop-led" but "grassroots-animated" initiative that he suggests represents a historic moment for the Catholic Church in the United States.

"It's a generational moment for us," Cozzens said during the bishops' [2023 plenary meeting](#) in Orlando, Florida. In that same gathering, Cozzens said that the congress needed to be seen as the bishops' own project in order for it to be successful.



San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone elevates the monstrance as he blesses the city and pilgrims after crossing the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco May 19. The event began the western route of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

"Only the bishops can call people from every parish. Only us as a group can really call the United States church together," Cozzens said then.

More recently in June, Cozzens told the bishops in Louisville that the religious events that have accompanied the eucharistic pilgrims on their way to Indianapolis have been "an experience of the church in all of her multicultural beauty."

But in promoting a kind of Catholicism heavy on individual piety, eucharistic adoration and processions, Faggioli said the bishops have chosen to invest in a "devotional-emotional" expression of the Catholic faith that is "quite the opposite" from being countercultural.

"Even if devotional-emotional Catholicism is the option that you as a church leader have chosen for the future, that kind of Catholicism can be sustainable only if it is formed to respond to the anti-ritual culture we live in, and I am afraid this has chosen another path," Faggioli said.

While the congress may reflect the type of conservative devotional Catholicism presented by EWTN or Franciscan University, several other sponsors, keynote speakers and breakout talk presentations will speak to more mainstream Catholic sensibilities.



Following midday prayer and adoration June 4 at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Lake Charles, Louisiana, pilgrims on the southern Juan Diego Route of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage process out of the cathedral to continue with the Eucharist to the offices of Catholic Charities of Southwest Louisiana, where pilgrims helped load food baskets to be given to locals in need. (OSV News/Courtesy of Lake Charles Diocese/Morris Lebleu)

The event's major sponsors also include Catholic Relief Services, Serra Clubs of the United States, Holy Cross Family Ministries and the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

While the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests was [reportedly](#) not allowed to be an exhibitor at the congress, other Catholic groups considered to be progressive leaning, such as the Society of Jesus and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, will have booths at the event alongside conservative groups such as Catholic Answers and the Napa Institute.

Other exhibitors include Catholic Charities USA, the Catholic Health Association of the United States, the Boston College Clough School of Theology and Ministry, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Responding to what he sees as "a false dichotomy" between eucharistic devotion and the sacrament's communal dimension, Glemkowski suggested that the crowds that have turned out on the pilgrimage routes in recent weeks offer "a great image" of the Eucharistic Revival.

"If you look at the crowds, you don't just see one type of Catholicism there," Glemkowski said. "You don't just see one group in the church. You see the church all together, unified around their love for the eucharistic Lord."