

Exploring the history and significance of Eucharistic congresses

As the Church begins gearing up for a U.S. National Eucharistic Congress several years from now – the first such event since 1976 to take place in this country beyond the diocesan level – a quick look at the history of these gatherings sheds light on their nature and purpose.

To begin with, don't let that word "congress" mislead you. Unlike, say, the U.S. Congress, a Eucharistic congress (the word literally means "coming together") doesn't pass laws. It is a religious gathering held for the purpose of increasing faith in the Blessed Sacrament and promoting Eucharistic devotion.

A national plan

The National Eucharistic Congress – planned for the summer of 2024 at a site yet to be determined – will be the culmination of a project called [the National Eucharistic Revival](#), which is being commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The revival comes after years of falling Mass attendance and polls showing declining faith among American Catholics in [the Real Presence of Christ](#) in the sacrament. The aim, according to the USCCB, is "to renew the Church by enkindling a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist." The Eucharistic congress is seen as having a central role in that.

Plans for the project were outlined to the bishops during their general assembly in June by Auxiliary Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens of St. Paul and Minneapolis, chairman of the planning committee.

The revival will get underway next summer. The emphasis in the first year will be centered on what dioceses can do to deepen the local Church's devotion to the Eucharist, followed in the second year by focusing on forming parish leaders. In the third year, it will move to the national level, with the Eucharistic congress the crowning event.

Starting in Europe

While each Eucharistic congress has its own unique features, congresses as such aren't new. The idea for such events was the brainchild of a pious French laywoman, Marie-Marthe-Baptistine Tamisier (1834-1910), who organized the first international congress at Lille, France, in 1881 with the theme "The Eucharist Saves the World."

In the years that followed, similar gatherings were held in other cities of continental Europe, with a particularly notable one occurring in Paris in 1888. A Eucharistic congress in Jerusalem in 1893 was the first outside of Europe.

The first congress in an English-speaking country was held in London in September 1908 and was also the first large-scale Catholic Church event in Great Britain since the Catholic-Protestant split three centuries earlier. Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, at that time the leading member in the American hierarchy, preached at the closing Mass.

International congresses were suspended during World War I, but they resumed after the war, with the first postwar gathering held in Rome in May 1922 under the theme "The Peaceful Reign of Our Lord Jesus Christ." Pope Pius XI celebrated the principal Mass in St. Peter's Square.

'Debut for the American Church'

The first congress in the United States took place in Chicago from June 20-24, 1926, and, as Chicago's Cardinal George

Mundelein intended, it was spectacular. In his book "American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners who Built America's Most Powerful Church," author Charles Morris calls it "a kind of formal debut for the American Church," and writes that it "signaled the expansive mood of American Catholicism, the leap from the immigrant ghetto into a wider world."

Some 400,000 people attended the opening Mass at Soldier Field, while for the closing Mass an estimated 800,000 traveled the 20 miles from the city to the new St. Mary of the Lake Seminary, many riding special trains laid on for the occasion by the Illinois Central Railroad.

A huge Eucharistic procession around the seminary's lake was nearly spoiled by a fierce thunderstorm. But then the rain stopped as suddenly as it began while a rainbow formed. "Almost in unison," writes Morris, "800,000 Irish and Italians, Poles and Germans, nuns and priests, cardinals and bishops, smiled and looked up, blinking, at the sky."

52ND INTERNATIONAL EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS



From Sept. 5-12, 2021, Budapest, Hungary, will host the 52nd International Eucharistic Congress. Pope Francis announced that he was planning on visiting Hungary to celebrate the event's closing Mass.

“For more than a century, the Eucharistic congresses have been reminding us that the Eucharist is at the center of the Church’s life,” Pope Francis said following his Angelus address on Dec. 15, 2019. “We pray that the Eucharistic event in Budapest may foster processes of renewal in Christian communities so that the salvation of which the Eucharist is the source may also be translated into a Eucharistic culture capable of inspiring men and women of goodwill in the fields of charity, peace, family, care of creation.”

Other events

In the years that followed, international congresses were held in Australia, South America, Africa and Asia. Following World War II, the series resumed in 1952 in Barcelona. The 1960 assembly in Munich featured the laying of a cornerstone for a “church of atonement” near the former Dachau concentration camp.

In August 1976, the U.S. bicentennial year, the 41st International Eucharistic Congress took place in Philadelphia. More than 1.5 million people attended the weeklong event whose theme was “The Eucharist and the Hungers of the Human Family.” Among the highlights were a candlelight procession from the local cathedral to the Philadelphia Art Museum with some

350,000 participants and a closing Mass attended by 96,000 in JFK Stadium at which President Gerald Ford spoke.

Speakers at other events in Philadelphia included at least two future canonized saints – then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Krakow, Poland (later, Pope John Paul II) and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, foundress of the Missionaries of Charity. Also on the program was a potential third saint: Catholic Worker foundress Dorothy Day, whose cause is now under consideration in Rome. As at other congresses before and since, the program consisted of Masses and other liturgies, Eucharistic devotions, formal talks and musical and cultural events.

While national and international Eucharistic congresses typically receive the most attention, diocesan congresses are not uncommon. Dioceses in Florida have had an annual “Florida Eucharistic Congress” for the last several years, and the Diocese of Richmond, Virginia, had one in 2020. The Dioceses of Charlotte, North Carolina, and Memphis, Tennessee, are preparing for ones later this year; the Archdiocese of Atlanta is planning for one next June.

Pageantry is a standard part of any large-scale Eucharistic congress, but the one envisaged by the bishops’ upcoming Eucharistic revival project will give particular emphasis to spiritual renewal and growth in faith. For as Pope St. John Paul II said in a papal document on the Blessed Sacrament, “The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship.”

It was true in the past, and it’s true in the present.

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