Ministry



Sister Bethany Madonna, vocation director for Sisters of Life, gives her keynote address to attendees at the 21st annual Cardinal O'Connor Conference on Life Jan. 25, 2020, at Georgetown University in Washington. Sister Madonna was the first of two keynote speakers who shared insights about the conference's theme, "Anchored in Truth: Receiving & Proclaiming the Gospel of Life." (CNS/Sydney Clark)



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According to Sr. Bethany Madonna, vocations director for the Sisters of Life, one's circumstances change, yet life is a gift.

Madonna addressed a crowd of over 700 attendees at the 21st annual Cardinal O'Connor Conference on Life Jan. 25 at Georgetown University. Organized completely by students, the conference is the largest student-run pro-life conference in the nation.

Acknowledging and knowing life is a gift is fundamental and primary, said Madonna, whose speech centered on how she receives the Gospel of life.

"This God made you with more care and one purpose," said Madonna. "Fingerprints indicate that you are the only you who has ever been or ever will be in the history of all of creation."

Madonna asked the audience to think about how God takes his precious time to develop and arrange the design of one's unique fingerprint and how much more time he took to develop the love in one's heart.

"No one loves like you. No one can be your replacement," said Madonna. "You are the only one who's been given that love to love with, and you're the only one who can receive God's love in the heart that he made for you."

God longs for his creation to receive his endless and reckless love, Madonna said. She then prompted the attendees to close their eyes and imagine that Genesis

moment when God created them and the exact moment of their conception.

"Regardless of circumstances, that moment when God said, 'Not another day without you, I choose you, I want you to be the breath of life, and you are always wanted,'" Madonna continued, speaking softly and slowly.

She encouraged those with their eyes closed to be alone with the warmth of certainty for a few moments and assured them that they can always return to that moment when God decided to bring them life.

Feelings of isolation can be tempting, as well as thoughts of being a burden to others or being rejected can enter into one's mindset, Madonna noted. Additionally, applying pressure to prove oneself can inhibit one's self-worth.

"Jesus, however, says, 'I will not leave you orphan. I will come to you,'" said Madonna.

Jonathan Reyes, senior vice president for evangelization and faith formation for the Knights of Columbus, followed Madonna's speech and expanded on the peril of isolation.

"The greatest poverty in the modern world is isolation and to be alone," said Reyes. "To be forgotten is the greatest sadness."

God not only gives life to people, Reyes said, but he also offers people the gift of sharing their lives with others in community.

"A part of what it means to be human is that you were made to be in relationships with others," he explained.

He told the audience a short story about St. Teresa of Kolkata and how she described one of her visits to a nursing home in the United States.

She walked in and noticed how clean and beautiful the facility was. She saw how the residents had everything they needed from comfortable chairs, TVs, food and blankets. St. Teresa, however, soon observed that none of the residents were smiling, and they were staring at the door.

She was puzzled by the sad expressions on their faces since the terminally ill residents who she tended to in Kolkata, India, smiled constantly.

Her colleague who was standing beside her responded, "It's because they're watching the door waiting for a loved one to come to visit them, because they've been forgotten."

Therefore, reaffirming love and humanity's dignity are never-ending and should be constant, according to Reyes.

"To be able to love and to actually proclaim the Gospel of life after having received it, you have to be prepared to give it," said Reyes. "If you want to help other people be free and be a witness to the Gospel of life, you have to be free yourself."

Reyes said that to be completely free, detachment is required. Detachment can include getting rid of thoughts that can consume the mind, such as depression, anxiety and people's opinions. Detachment also extends to material goods.

The reality, however, is that one has to embrace suffering and endure sacrifices. These factors come with love, receiving and proclaiming the Gospel of life, said Reyes.

Participating in service should be joyful and fulfilling, he said, yet cautioned attendees that "romanticism about caring for the elderly, the poor, the unborn and other causes will wear off."

He challenged the audience to reflect on this question: "What will sustain me in that service?"

This is why building solid communities is crucial, Reyes said.

Madonna added, "We're so hungry for love. We need friendship, we need encouragement. We need to spur each other on."

Each person's love is good and is worth fighting for, said Sister Madonna. "Your love can change the world. I want you to rise above the palm tree standard that's been set for you and know that Jesus wants to reveal your plan for life."

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