

# Meeting with Men of God: A Review of the 2016 Connecticut Catholic Men's Conference

**Internet Tags:** A review of the 2016 Connecticut Catholic Men's Conference with the theme of "Year of Mercy." showing the power of mercy in the lives of Catholic men.

**By Mark C. McCann**

The 10th Annual Connecticut Catholic Men's Conference is currently in the planning stages and this year's conference looks to be as dynamic and life-changing as ever. The conference will be held on Saturday, October 21, 2017, at Saint Paul Catholic High School in Bristol. The theme for this year's conference is, "*You Will Be My Witnesses: The Apostolate of the Laity.*" Among the speakers to be featured this year are Bishop Frank Caggiano, spiritual leader of the Diocese of Bridgeport; Tim Staples, Director of Apologetics and Evangelization at Catholic Answers; Raymond Arroyo, Managing Editor and Lead Anchor for EWTN News and The World Over Live, and a New York Times Bestselling author; Jim Wahlberg, Executive Director of the Mark Wahlberg Youth Foundation; and Rev. Glenn Sudano, CFR, one of the original eight founders of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal.

As we prepare for this year's event, I thought it would be appropriate to take a look back at last year's conference as a reminder of the powerful impact these conferences can have on shaping our individual ministries as Catholic men of faith. For the past five years I have been attending the Connecticut Catholic Men's conference with my father-in-law; and each time, I have come out of that brief retreat from the daily grind a much better man. I find that there is something wonderfully uplifting about being with so many brothers as we put aside our egos and bring our man-made messes before the Father in celebration our common faith. The theme for the 2016 conference was, "Year of Mercy," a celebration of The Holy Father's call to live out what it means to show the kind of mercy that we, in Christ, have been shown.

As a Christian writer, I am an introverted observer at heart. As I listened to the speakers and watched as we took in their powerful words, I saw all of us letting our guard down in order to share in the strength of the Spirit's prompting. Here our pain and our strength found purpose as God began working out in real time the tension between being human and being caught up in Christ. In the divinely-inspired give and take between the presenters and the audience, there was real transformation in the connection we shared, for these events are never one-sided. The talks moved the men who responded with openness and joy; and that encouraged the speakers to become more open to their own journeys and deliver their talks with greater conviction. This dynamic built throughout the day as testimonies of truth and knowledge penetrated our hearts and drew us all closer to our Savior and to one another as men.

## **The Divine Give and Take...**

Our Master of Ceremonies, Marty Rotella, fired up the group with his humor, music, and positive spirit. He set the pace by putting the theme out there right from the start: that God is a God of mercy, that He sees us as fearfully and wonderfully made, and that He calls us to take His merciful love and carry it to a fallen world. Throughout the day, Marty kept us focused on the higher purposes behind all the practical details. But he was no mere facilitator, for he answered the Holy Spirit's call to pour his own ideas into the dialogue; and every time he spoke, he punctuated the conversations of others with his own inspired touch.

## **Messages of Mercy and Changed Understandings**

This year's speakers took the theme of the conference and brought out different facets of God's character of mercy to share with the audience. Each man had had a radical encounter with the mercy of God and had come out of that experience ready and willing to take on the challenges of the particular ministry to which God had called him. These were not men sitting on a pedestal of pride, but humble servants who recognized that only the perfect and persistent mercy of God could transform them from worldly men to faithful ministers of the Gospel.

Author and revivalist Deacon Art Miller brought us a message from Mark 10 and John 11. As he spoke, he playfully gathered men from the audience to serve as living props for his retelling of the stories of Blind Bartimaeus and the Raising of Lazarus. His message was simple: When God gives us the power to see, we choose to follow Him along the way. Our faith becomes the bridge between our former fear and the exciting new challenges of walking a life of discipleship. He taught us that the One who wept for our sorrow is the Savior who continues to call us to loose the bonds of those who have been brought from death to life.

Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio brought an infectious message of the healing power of mercy to refute idea of salvation as a mere legal declaration by God. Justice, he said, was paying what we owed to God and getting what we deserved for our actions; but mercy was the fullness of that justice; for only in Christ, could the debt mankind owed to our Creator be paid in full. Sin, he said, wounds us and puts us in bondage, while mercy makes each of us a new creation, a transformed believer ready to follow Christ. While some Christians fail to see the need for believers to confess their sins to a priest, D'Ambrosio put it in the simplest of terms: Sin causes a rippling effect in creation, touching many lives and wounding them all. But Confession ties us to the mercy of God, allowing us through our Penance, not to pay God back, but to be molded from the inside out as we heal and refocus our lives on joyful, servant living.

Father Anthony Curran rounded out the first half of the conference by asking and answering the questions, "Where is God?" and "Who is God?" He reminded us of Pope

Francis' assertion that God's name is Mercy, and pointed out that God's primary action is "mercy." He told us that many of our images of God are skewed; and when we put aside those misconceptions and get into the reality of living as Catholic men, we find out just where and who God is. Father Curran shared two personal stories: one of a former rebellious student who became a seminarian and the other of a man dying from A.I.D.S. who discovered how the mercy of God showed him both sides of the human condition through the lens of God's love. Father Curran even shared the radical truth that he felt this man who had died was the holiest person he had ever met – not because of what he had done, but because of what he had allowed God to do. He finished his message by talking about Rembrandt's painting of "The Prodigal Son," pointing out how the artist chose a feeble, blind, old man to be the model of the father in the story to illustrate how our heavenly Father breaks all our visions of His character and receives us with a tender hand and an eye blind to our sin.

### **The Reconciling Power of Mercy in Broken Lives**

After lunch I took time for Confession, seeking out the God of mercy. The priest who heard my sins truly reflected the character of the God portrayed that morning. I felt convicted of my sin, but overjoyed to know that it was cast away in God's holy act of non-remembrance. As I knelt afterward to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, I understood more clearly just how much God had given to this world by sending His Son to be our merciful Savior.

The second half of the conference began with a series of short sermons from gifted speakers. Deacon Michael Puscas spoke about the rampant moral relativism in our society and our need to stand against it. He quoted from Bishop Fulton Sheen who said that our world was suffering not from intolerance, but from tolerance. Puscas reminded us that when we accept the lie that says that each man's personal morality is right for him, it lowers the standards of right and wrong. He said we were called not to set the bar of morality but to uphold God's standards and so become truly free.

Father Peter Towsley spoke about Confession and called us to engage as agents of mercy in the world. He used the acronym of *P.R.A.Y.E.R.* to show us our need to **P**raise God, **R**epent of sin, **A**sk (Ask, Seek, Knock) for what we need, **Y**ield to the will of the Father in our lives, **E**mpower others in the journey, and **R**esolve to live what we profess. He reminded us that until we have been shown mercy we cannot give mercy to others. God, he said, is the greatest of coaches, ready to help us to get back into the game of life, for He knows our weaknesses and how to transform them. He finished by challenging the men to experience the sacrament of Confession every other week for the next two months.

Dan Renaud spoke of entering into the dynamism of mercy, God's free gift that provides the strength, power, and authority we need, not to compete, but to live moral lives. He pointed out that we are not loved because we are good, but are good because we have been loved. He too used Rembrandt's "The Prodigal Son," pointing out how the artist

painted the son like an overgrown developing child in the womb, coming from his self-centered life to a rebirth in the forgiveness offered by the father. The older brother was shown as looking down with disdain on the return of the younger brother. The father was shown with both masculine and feminine aspects to teach us that mercy is being rebirthed into the image of Christ.

Dr. D'Ambrosio gave a second talk on the early Fathers of the Church. He said that the societal sin and moral depravity we see today were even worse in their own way in the early Church. He wanted us to draw strength from the fact that our faith was founded by men like Justin, Ambrose, and Augustine, who drew their strength from the Apostles and helped to define who we are today as Catholics. It was a message of hope to a Church still working out in the real world what it means to be a people of mercy.

Just before our worship, Dr. D'Ambrosio was joined on stage by Hartford Archbishop Leonard Blair for a panel discussion. Members of the audience brought their questions for consideration. The men shared openly their pain and their deep concern for the Church they loved so much. Archbishop Blair handled each encounter with tenderness, truth, and respect as he shared his heart openly and honestly with these men. More than simply offering answers to these concerns, the Archbishop and Dr. D'Ambrosio helped us to understand that we are all in this together, growing and transforming as a Church through the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **Worship and Lessons Learned**

We ended the day with Mass, with music provided by *Jerusalem Road*, who truly helped us to lift our hearts and minds before the throne of the God. The Gospel was from Luke 18:9-14: the story of The Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Through the tender sermon from Archbishop Blair, we were once more united around the awesome truth that God is the One who seeks us out and sees into our hearts to offer us mercy and forgiveness. As we celebrated the Eucharist that day I could not help but be touched by the fact that I was sharing at the table with so many souls who had come to lay their very lives before the altar of the almighty, merciful Father. I left that day feeling refreshed from the weary road, renewed in my commitment to be a man of mercy, and reborn to the idea that God sees me as someone who is fearfully and wonderfully made!

I look forward to this year's conference and all that it will bring into the lives of Catholic men in Connecticut. As a lay leader for many years, I have seen firsthand how important the work of every individual Catholic can be in bearing witness to the saving work of Jesus Christ. I am blessed to be involved this year in helping to make it all happen. The lessons we as Catholic men can learn from our time together are invaluable: that God can soften our hearts to receive His mercy and love and lead us to deeper fellowship with one another; that salvation is a beautiful mystery that our fallen race never fully expected but so desperately needed; and that being a Catholic man is an awesome privilege and a solemn responsibility to the world in which we live. I urge you to consider coming away

from the daily grind to join with your Catholic brothers in learning what it means to live out our call to follow Jesus and build up His Church. God bless!