

Women challenged to place faith at the centre of family life

For Kelsey Papastritas, motherhood is a delicate balancing act.

The 28-year-old says it's a daunting task to keep up with managing a household while raising three kids. Add imparting her Catholic faith amid an increasingly secular culture that seems to put God aside, and being a parent can seem overwhelming.

"To find moms who are around my age and Catholic is a little difficult sometimes," said Papastritas as she held tight to seven-month-old Eleanor, her youngest child.



Kelsey Papastritas holds her seven-month-old daughter Eleanor. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

“It’s a great challenge to live out our faith along with all the other responsibilities of raising kids. And one thing I worry about all the time is that I personally have to be strong in the faith before I can really pass it on to my children.”

So for Papastritas, and more than 300 other Catholic women of all ages, the annual Women of Dignity conference at Holy Trinity Parish in Spruce Grove has been an oasis of peace in the maelstrom of life.

“It’s reassuring to come here with other young mothers who have those same priorities. I feel very understood,” said Papastritas, who attended the Nov. 29-30 event for the first time.

This camaraderie is the essence of the Women of Dignity Conference, said organizer Kristen Schiller of Catholic Family Ministries. The two days of lectures, fellowship and spiritual development brought women, young and old, from across Alberta.



Kristen Schiller

The objective has remained the same at every conference: to offer Catholic women a sense of belonging and empowerment.

“Here we try and bring women from all walks of life who want to come together and grow in their faith,” Schiller said. “The message here is not one of ‘God loves me so whatever I do I’m fine.’ It’s about asking ourselves ‘How can we take that love forward?’ We want to go out there and evangelize and live the Gospel.”

For Mary Bielski, the great threat to Catholic women today is losing sight of that message.

“What we have now is an identity crisis. Many of us have lost sight of who we really are,” said Bielski, an internationally recognized Catholic speaker and youth minister.

“The culture has a lot of lies we have to fight through ... that our joy in life rests in worldly things and not in God. People seek their identities in so many things, but it’s only the beauty of Christ that sets us free. So we need to have faith and be warriors for the Church.”

But to be a warrior is no simple feat. The challenge to keep faith at the centre of family life was a concern for many women in attendance.

“There’s no doubt our Catholic faith is quite contrary to most popular culture now,” said Stacey Jost of St. Albert. “We’re constantly challenged to balance our faith against what goes on among [our children’s] peer groups or the world at large.



Stacey Jost

“But to instill the faith in our kids, I think a big part of that is taking the time to be introspective, to make sure there’s room for God in our own hearts. An event like this really offers that experience – to be reaffirmed in prayer and to focus on spiritual growth each day.”

Spiritual growth amidst life’s difficulties was a main focus for Bielski and Rev. Paul Moret, pastor of Holy Trinity Parish. Bielski emphasized that women should not cope with their patterns of sin, but bring them in prayer and seek God’s grace in healing bad habits.

In his presentation to the conference, Moret identified many permanent changes left by the sexual revolution of the 1960s – such as the normalization of birth

control and the rise in divorce. Moret says prayer is crucial for women who wish to raise their families with traditional Catholic values.

Harriet Fraser, a mother of 12 children and grandmother of 32, said she felt refreshed by the talks.



Harriet Fraser

“Not only as a Catholic, but also as a mother of 12, you can sometimes think you’re alone in the boat,” said Fraser, 70, who has attended the conference for the past three years.

“But to hear Father Paul defend the Church’s teachings on birth control, which is something I’ve always been passionate about, it’s a great reminder that Jesus is in the boat too. That’s what I enjoy most about coming here. It builds my faith with other women on this same journey, who see all the same common issues, like the harm that social media and technology can have on our young people.”

Despite the sometimes grim descriptions of modern life, both guest speakers ultimately offered a message of hope.

“I want these women to know that in the sight of all the chaos and confusion of the world, we can stand at ease because we have the victory. We just need to walk in it,” said Bielski.

“Yes, there is a lot of discouragement in the Church today, a lack of awareness of Christ and the power of our faith. But if we know who we really are and the power of Christ, we’d see the culture isn’t going to kill us. We could set the world ablaze.”