News



Kim Harris leads attendees in song during her keynote address at the 13th Annual Assembly of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests June 26 in Lexington, Kentucky. (Paul Leingang)

by Michael Centore

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On the website for the National Eucharistic Revival sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the gift of the Eucharist is enumerated in four key words: *created*, *fallen*, *saved* and *restored*.

In his two-part retreat that opened the 13th Annual Assembly of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests, held June 24-27 in Lexington, Kentucky, Bishop John Stowe explored the dynamics of the Eucharist through an alternate set of terms: *taken*, *blessed*, *broken* and *shared*.

The subtle distinction pointed to a theme that ran throughout this year's assembly: the idea of the Eucharist as a participatory rather than a purely devotional experience. This was reinforced by the assembly's title, "Eucharist: Sacrament of Encounter."

The retreat led by Stowe, the bishop of Lexington, set the tone for three days of keynote addresses, colloquiums, prayer and fellowship shared by more than 200 registered attendees.



Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, is seen with attendees at the assembly of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests, held June 24-27 in Lexington, Kentucky. (Paul Leingang)

Fr. Michael Driscoll, professor emeritus of theology at the University of Notre Dame, delivered the first keynote on Monday evening. The subject of his talk was "How the Eucharist Schools Us for Action."

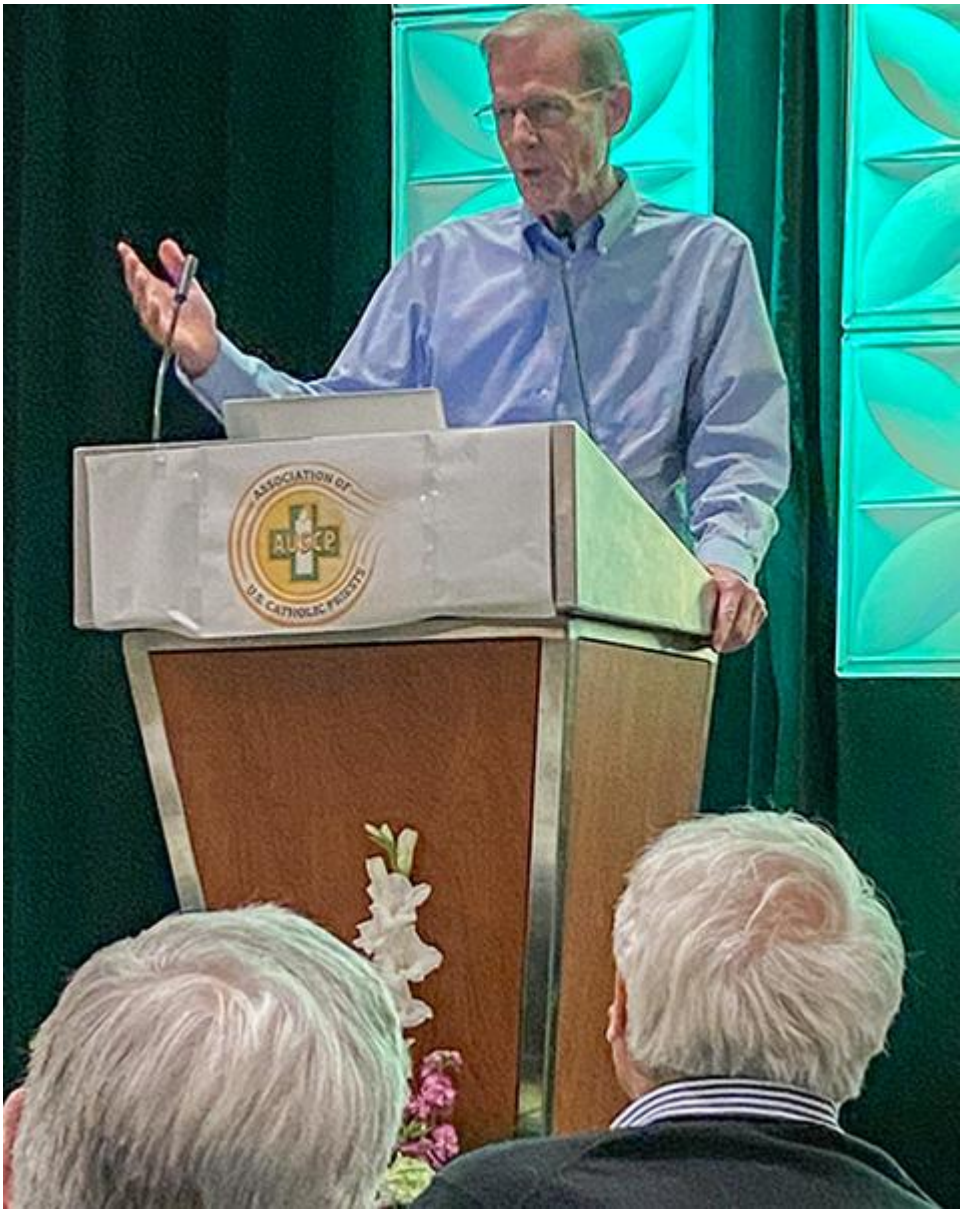
Driscoll described the Eucharist as "a mystery to be celebrated, believed and lived." He explored liturgical developments over the past 25 years, drawing on documents such as Pope Benedict XVI's apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*.

Benedict saw the Eucharist as both "a meal" and "a sacrifice," Driscoll said. He quoted from *Sacramentum Caritatis* to draw a line between the Eucharist and public life: "The Christian laity, formed at the school of the Eucharist, are called to assume their specific political and social responsibilities."

Through images, symbols and ritual actions, the liturgy draws people into a shared experience, Driscoll said. A well-executed liturgy can serve as a "first level of mystagogy," or what he defined as "a way of knowing from within."

Since prayer shapes belief and belief informs action, this knowledge carries over into our engagement with the world, Driscoll said. "To ignore this inner connection between Eucharist and life is to ignore the bond between the life and mission of the church," he added.

Driscoll's quotation from a homily of St. John Chrysostom drew applause from the crowd: "What good is it if the eucharistic table is overloaded with golden chalices, when he is dying of hunger? Start by satisfying his hunger, and then, with what is left, you may adorn the altar as well."



Archbishop John Wester accepts the St. John XXIII Award from the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests on June 26. (Michael Centore)

Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese of Religion News Service opened Tuesday's events with his keynote, "Eucharist for a Synodal Church: Communion, Mission, Participation."

Reese identified the complementarity between the Vatican's synod on synodality and the U.S. bishops' National Eucharistic Revival. Synodality "makes for a better Eucharist" while Eucharist "creates and nourishes synodality," he said. He added that synodality and Eucharist share a focus on communion, participation and mission.

Pope Francis, Reese said, "wants to overcome the polarization in the church so that it can be a true sign and instrument of communion with God and with humanity."

This involves the people of God taking up "the mission of Jesus in announcing to the world the Good News of the Gospel, the love and mercy of God toward all humanity and indeed all creation," he said.

American Catholics who are used to prioritizing "efficiency and results" may have a difficult time with Francis' notion of a shared journey that is more about "process" and "changing the culture of the church" than documents and structures, he said.

Reese highlighted several important issues that arose in the October synod report, including priestly formation, "eucharistic hospitality" for interchurch couples, and the need to make liturgical language more accessible.

The eucharistic revival could have merged with the intentions of the synod, Reese said, though the revival is "more about benediction than celebration of Eucharist" with a "focus on personal experience rather than mission."

He contrasted this with an analysis of the structure of the Eucharistic Prayer. The prayer "is so Trinitarian," he said. "It's us praying in Jesus, with Jesus, to the Father."

He observed that "this prayer is said in the plural," thus involving the whole community in the process of proclaiming, offering and "transforming those present into the body of Christ to continue his mission in the world."

"It's not about bringing Jesus to the altar so that we can worship him" but rather "being empowered by the Spirit to continue the mission of Jesus," Reese said.

> 'How do you intentionally use your life as a demonstrative platform for the Gospel? ... How do you share your testimony of faith in a way that touches others?'
>
> —Kim Harris
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In her keynote on Wednesday, "You Can Tell the World!: Testimony as a Gift We Share from Our Eucharistic Encounter," Kim Harris spoke of the "implications" of testimony as a chance to reflect "on the power of the living God."

"Testimony is a part of who we are as Catholic Christian people," said Harris, who is assistant professor of African American thought and practice in the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University.

Harris focused on five kinds of testimony or witness to one's faith: physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual. A gifted cantor, she incorporated music and movement into her presentation, inviting attendees to join in song.

Harris explained that physical testimony involves asking, "Who is there with us, and who is missing or overlooked?" She prompted attendees to consider what it means "when we hear the words of tradition proclaimed by many different voices," including those of different races, heritages and life experiences.

She cited instances when Scripture has been twisted to suppress people's testimony, such as the excision of chapters referring to the freeing of the Israelites in Bibles that were given to enslaved people.

Intellectual testimony begins by recognizing that "people's learning has come in different ways" and ensuring we do not "dismiss them," she said. She used the example of the hymn "Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees" as "a song of faith and a song of freedom" with coded language enslaved people used to communicate with one another.

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Defining the "goal of the Eucharist" as "to know yourself" and "the power of the living God," she concluded her presentation with prompts for reflection, including: "How do you intentionally use your life as a demonstrative platform for the Gospel?" and "How do you share your testimony of faith in a way that touches others?"

In a question-and-answer session moderated by Ellie Hidalgo of Discerning Deacons following the keynote, Harris said, "We have to remind ourselves that Eucharist is a verb."

"We need to be revived, we need to be woken up," she continued. "Be that verb, and then you'll be able to invite other people to do the same."

Fr. Greg Barras, chair of the leadership team for the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests, praised the way the keynote speakers emphasized "the relational dimension of the Eucharist."

"The fullness of eucharistic theology is communal," he said. "We embrace the brokenness, which is where we find the presence of Christ. I can't fix you, but I can feed you."

Wednesday evening concluded with the presentation of the St. John XXIII Awards, given annually to those who embody the values espoused by the association. This year's recipients were Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Franciscan Sr. Marge Eilerman who has served in pastoral and social outreach in eastern Kentucky for more than 30 years.

Wester acknowledged how much the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests has "helped to teach me," particularly "the way you pray and listen to one another."

"You've done far more for me than I could ever do for this association," he said.

A version of this story appeared in the **July 19-August 1, 2024** print issue under the headline: US priests' assembly emphasizes relational dimension of the Eucharist.