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Newt Gingrich headlines K of C prolife conference

by Denis Grasska by Catholic News Service

SAN DIEGO -- A lineup of high-profile presenters, including former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, headlined the first Mother of Life Conference.

About 1,800 people attended the conference held Aug. 14 at San Diego State University's Viejas Arena and sponsored by the San Diego chapter of the Knights of Columbus.

In a speech presented with his wife, Callista, Gingrich criticized the secularization of American society, which he said is occurring despite the opposition of a majority of Americans.

"We believe that each individual is endowed by our Creator with the right to life," he said, "and that no government can stand in the way of our pursuit of freedom and full human dignity."

In their presentation, the Gingriches made several references to their new documentary, "Nine Days That Changed the World," which was screened immediately after their presentation.

The film reflects on the significance of Pope John Paul II's historic pilgrimage to his native Poland in 1979. His nine-day visit is believed by many to have played a pivotal role in the fall of Soviet communism.

The former House speaker, who recently became a Catholic, drew parallels between secular elites in contemporary America and the atheistic, communist government that once controlled Poland.

"Our elites fail to recognize the irony that our own courts are as fully anti-religious as any institution in the Polish dictatorship," he said, "and our elite culture is as frightened of Christ and the cross as any secular group in past radical regimes."

Other conference speakers included Jesuit Father Mitch Pacwa, founder of Ignatius Productions and a popular host on the EWTN television and radio network; Lila Rose, president of Live Action, a nonprofit organization that uses "new media" to expose the corruption of the abortion industry; Leslie Brunolli, who serves as San Diego regional coordinator for the Silent No More Awareness campaign; and Father Thomas Euteneuer, president of Human Life International.

Father Pacwa spoke about the destructive legacy of three U.S. Supreme Court decisions -- Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857), Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and Roe v. Wade (1973) -- calling each "an attack on human dignity, a moving away from our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution."

The first two decisions denied the full human dignity of African-Americans, while the third created a constitutional right to abort unborn children.

Because God created human beings in his image and likeness, Father Pacwa said, "(human) dignity is not something that the state can give, nor can the state take it away."

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As he concluded his presentation, he noted that Catholicism has the most adherents of any faith in the United States, making Catholics well-positioned "to call our nation back to its founding principles."

Rose, a 22-year-old pro-life activist, discussed the results of her hidden-camera exposes of corruption at Planned Parenthood clinics throughout the country. Presenting herself as an underage girl impregnated by an older male, she has documented clinic employees encouraging her to lie about her age.

Rose's videos, which can be seen at www.liveaction.org, have received national attention. As a result of the videos, certain Planned Parenthood affiliates have been investigated and have lost their taxpayer subsidies.

"Together, we can face the death that is around us and build this culture of life," Rose said. Through working together, "we are going to reach our goal of creating a country where every life is protected by love and by law, where every unborn child is seen with dignity and with respect."

Brunolli, flanked by other post-abortive women, told the story of her own abortion and the decades of pain that followed.

"I stand here today with my sisters in Christ, who also made the choice to have an abortion," she said. "We thought that our choice would be a solution to our immediate problems. ... (But) we have suffered spiritually, physically and emotionally because of our choice."

Father Euteneuer, who delivered a presentation of his own, also celebrated the closing Mass. He devoted his homily to the conference's namesake. He said Christians "impoverish their Christianity" when they fail to recognize the Blessed Mother's importance.

"My friends, don't ever underestimate the power of Mary to help you in your lives and in your work as Christians," he said. "You have many souls to touch, and Mary's there to be with you."

Plans are already under way to bring the conference back for a second year, said Kamal Alsawaf, president of the San Diego chapter of the Knights of Columbus. Organizers are discussing the possibility

of a more diverse lineup of speakers, which might include non-Catholic Christians as well as African-American and Hispanic Catholic presenters.

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