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National Eucharistic Congresses: Character and History

A three-year National Eucharistic Revival will begin in the United States on June 19, 2022, the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. The Revival's mission is to renew the Church in this country by enkindling a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, and it will culminate in a national Eucharistic congress in Indianapolis from July 17-21, 2024. More information about the Revival and the National Congress may be found at EucharisticRevival.org. As the Church in the United States begins this journey, it is helpful to revisit the meaning of Eucharistic congresses and their history in our nation.

Character and Structure of Eucharistic Congresses

The ritual book *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside Mass* describes Eucharistic congresses in its third chapter, "Various Forms of Worship of the Most Holy Eucharist," nos. 109-112. At its heart, a Eucharistic congress is a "station" (*statio*) or gathering of the Church around the mystery of the Eucharist. The description of a congress as a "station" connects it with the ancient Roman tradition of stational liturgies. On certain days, the bishop of Rome traveled to one of the many churches of Rome for the celebration of the Eucharist. There, representatives of the entire diocese gathered for a single Eucharistic sacrifice, an especially powerful manifestation of the unity of the Church. This tradition exists in some form even today. According to the *Ceremonial of Bishops*, a stational Mass is that Mass which the bishop celebrates surrounded by his priests, deacons, and lay ministers, with the whole people of God participating; here, the preeminent manifestation of the Church takes place (no. 119). The *statio* of a Eucharistic congress ought to be seen in this light. What stational liturgy expresses, so too does a Eucharistic congress.

These congresses may be diocesan, hosted by a community for the entire local Church; regional or national, hosted by a local Church for other Churches of a region or nation; or international, hosted by a local Church chosen by the Holy Father, for Churches of the entire world. Diocesan, regional, and national congresses are convoked by bishops, and international congresses by the Holy Father. The purpose of these congresses is eucharistic understanding and worship. Those gathered strive to more fully understand a particular aspect of the Eucharistic mystery expressed by the congress's theme, and they worship the Eucharistic mystery publicly, in a bond of charity and unity. For these congresses to be true "stations," the full participation of the local Church and other Churches is essential.

Both exterior and interior preparation is critical for the fruitfulness of a Eucharistic congress. First, a study of the theme is made by experts in theological, biblical, liturgical, pastoral, and ecumenical matters as well as in the human sciences. At international congresses, this study usually culminates in the publication of a base text. Next, special attention is given to preparing for the congress through catechesis, worship, and charity. In catechesis, participants reflect upon the Eucharist as the Paschal Mystery of Christ, who is truly, really, and substantially present in the eucharistic species. He is alive and at work in his body the Church. In worship, participants commit themselves to the full, conscious, and active participation which the liturgy demands. This participation bears fruit in hearing the Word of God, self-offering in the Eucharistic sacrifice, and the unity of the Church. In charity, participants live out the generosity that flows from the Eucharistic table. In this way, the Eucharist shines forth as a sign of solidarity, of sharing with the poor, and of the just and fraternal world which awaits its ultimate fulfillment in the Kingdom of Heaven.

A congress lasts anywhere from one day to several days, and the celebration of the Mass is always its center and summit. International Eucharistic congresses culminate in the *statio orbis* (“station of the world”), the celebration of the Eucharist at which the Holy Father or his legate presides as a visible sign of the communion of the universal Church. Besides the Mass, there are celebrations of the Word of God, catechetical sessions, and public conferences that explore the congress’s theme. A variety of catecheses that meet the capacity of different groups are offered. Common prayer and extended adoration take place in some suitable, nearby churches, which provide opportunities to internalize the theme. A special feature of the congress are Eucharistic processions, which take place according to the norms established by the Diocesan Bishop and in light of the social and religious conditions of the place.

History of National Eucharistic Congresses

Inspired and organized by French laywoman Marie-Marthe-Baptistine Tamisier (1834-1910), the first Eucharistic congress – international in scope – was held in Lille, France in 1881. Its theme was “The Eucharist Saves the World.” In subsequent years, an international Eucharistic congress has been held twice in the United States. In 1926, a congress was held in Chicago on the theme “The Eucharist and the Christian Life.” In 1976, the Bicentennial of the United States of America, a congress was held in Philadelphia on the theme “The Eucharist and the Aspirations of the Human Family.” But the United States also has a rich history of national Eucharistic congresses, with nine of them held between 1895 and 1941.

The First Phase under Bishop Maes: 1895–1911

The first National Eucharistic Congress took place in 1895 on the campus of The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. The Priests’ Eucharistic League of the United States had called for such a congress at its convention at Notre Dame University a year before, and this organization together with Bishop Camillus Maes of the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky, its president and the promoter of Eucharistic congresses in the U.S., played key roles in this congress and those following it. With Bishop Maes presiding, 25 bishops and 250 priests attended, among whom were Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, through whom Pope Leo XIII sent greetings by letter, and Archbishop Francesco di Paolo Satolli, apostolic delegate to the United States. In addition to the daily celebration of Mass and a Eucharistic procession, clergy presented papers on eucharistic themes, such as the role of the Eucharist in the life of priests and seminarians, pastoral methods for promoting eucharistic devotion, sacramental preparation, the Priests’ Eucharistic League, and even on the Eastern Churches. At its conclusion, the congress issued a number of resolutions concerning eucharistic doctrine and practice.

Bishop Maes presided over the next four congresses, the second of which took place in St. Louis in 1901 under a similar format: the presence of numerous bishops and priests as well as the apostolic delegate; prayer; presentation and discussion of papers by clergy; and concluding resolutions. In 1904, New York City hosted the third National Eucharistic Congress. For the first time in the history of these national congresses, the churches of the city joined in through a solemn triduum in honor of the Blessed Sacrament, with prayer each morning and night of the event. Pope Pius X addressed the congress by letter, and at its conclusion the delegates issued a resolution of sympathy with clergy and religious undergoing persecution in France. These resolutions were communicated to the cardinal archbishops of Paris and Lyons, and copies were personally delivered to Pope Pius X and Cardinal François Richard of Paris. A fourth congress occurred in Pittsburgh in 1907. In the months leading up to it, Catholic media

reported that Cardinal Serafino Vannutelli, Secretary of the Congregation for Universal Inquisition (what is today the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), would attend, and the event was billed as an international Eucharistic congress. The Vatican later denied these reports. Notably, a layman presented a paper at the congress for the first time. The fifth was held in Cincinnati in 1911 in the shadow of Pope Pius X's decree, *Quam singulari*, which affirmed that children who have reached the age of reason are obliged to receive the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion, and to receive them frequently thereafter. Delegates made several practical resolutions for carrying out this decree. These first five congresses were mostly gatherings of clergy, although some congress events included participation of the laity of the host city and its surrounding area.

The Second Phase under Bishop Schrembs: 1930–1941

After a nineteen-year interval, the next congress took place in Omaha in 1930. Bishop Joseph Schrembs of the Diocese of Cleveland, president of the Priests' Eucharistic League, called the congress and issued an invitation not only to clergy but also to all Catholic laity, the first national invitation to laity in the history of national Eucharistic congresses. In addition to the usual planning committee of clergy, there was a lay committee, and the sessions for clergy were complemented by sessions and programs for Catholic men and women. The congress included messages from Pope Pius XI and President Herbert Hoover as well as the presence of the apostolic delegate, the governor of Nebraska, and the mayor of Omaha. "Holy Name Night," an evening rally of nearly 50,000, was held at Creighton College's stadium, consisting of addresses, music, and prayers. A reported 25,000 participated in the Eucharistic procession concluding the congress. Following the event in Omaha, the U.S. bishops appointed Bishop Schrembs as promoter of national Eucharistic congresses in the United States, and he established a permanent committee for national Eucharistic congresses.

The seventh congress was held over four days in 1935 in Cleveland, Bishop Schrembs's see. The bishops of the U.S. designated the Sunday prior to the congress as National Communion Sunday, a day for all U.S. Catholics to prepare for and receive Holy Communion. Cardinal Patrick Hayes, archbishop of New York, served as papal legate for the congress, the first appointment of this kind in the history of national congresses. Those present also included the apostolic delegate, the governor of Ohio, and the mayor of Cleveland. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Pope Pius XI addressed those gathered by letter, and opening addresses were given by Alfred Smith, former governor of New York and Democratic presidential candidate, and Msgr. Fulton Sheen, professor at The Catholic University of America. Initially, the congress planned to use Cleveland's 13,000-seat Public Auditorium for nearly all of its functions, but, after the opening Mass on Tuesday morning, moved many events to Municipal Stadium with a seating capacity of around 80,000 (FirstEnergy Stadium, the home of the Cleveland Browns, now sits on this site). At this congress the number of "sectional meetings" grew exponentially, with sessions for priests, religious women, university students, nurses, journalists, public service workers, social service workers, youth, parents and educators, and professionals. In another space, dubbed the "Hall of Altars," 128 altars were erected for the celebration of Mass, representing every diocese and vicariate in the U.S. and its territories. The congress included a Divine Liturgy in the Ruthenian Rite, and a Mass for men took place by candlelight at midnight on Thursday. The overflow crowd in the stadium and on the field at this event prevented the distribution of communion. The concluding Eucharistic procession from Public Auditorium to Municipal Stadium included 20,000 people who formed the shape of a living monstrance on the field around the monstrance on the altar. Following benediction, Pope Pius XI addressed the congress by radio and gave the apostolic blessing.

In many ways, the work that began in Omaha in 1930 was realized in 1935 in Cleveland, and this congress's scope, schedule, and size established a template for future national Eucharistic congresses. While organizers in Cleveland had been surprised by the large turnout, future congresses prepared for considerable crowds. The eighth National Eucharistic Congress was held in New Orleans in 1938, the first in the deep south. The schedule was remarkably similar to Cleveland: National Communion Sunday; a radio address and blessing by the Holy Father, who was also represented in the person of the papal legate, Cardinal George Mundelein; civic participation; numerous Masses, holy hours, and sectionals for different groups; midnight Mass by candlelight; and celebrations of Mass in an Eastern rite. At the initiative of a laywoman of the archdiocese, jewelry and precious stones were donated for the creation of the congress's monstrance, assets whose original value totaled \$200,000. The monstrance was designed by a local jewelry firm and appraised at \$35,000 – a value of \$700,000 today. Additionally, several events were held for African American Catholics at Xavier University, the first and only

historically Black Catholic university in the United States. In its resolutions, the clergy section called not only for frequent communion but “that the laity be strongly encouraged to ‘pray the Mass’ with the priest at the Altar, uniting themselves to him in the offering of the Holy Sacrifice through the medium of liturgical prayer.”

In 1941, the ninth congress was held in St. Paul–Minneapolis. In addition to the usual program, the 26 sectionals included a session for employers and employees, applying the teachings of Catholic social encyclicals to the American context, and a sectional for liturgists, with an address given by Abbot Alcuin Deutsch of St. John’s Abbey, Collegeville. While resolutions had previously been issued only by the clergy sections, nearly every group issued resolutions in Minneapolis.

A Pause: 1941–Present

Six months after the 1941 congress in St. Paul–Minneapolis, the United States entered the Second World War. In 1940, the conflict had led to the cancellation of that year’s international congress scheduled in Nice, France, and the next international congress would not be held until 1952 in Barcelona. In like manner, national Eucharistic congresses all over the world were put on hold. Bishop Schrembs of Cleveland, promoter of national Eucharistic congresses, died shortly thereafter in 1945. Archbishop Richard Cushing of Boston succeeded him, and in 1946 established a committee for national Eucharistic congresses so that these events might resume. The particulars of what followed remain a question. While the United States would host an international congress in 1976 in Philadelphia and diocesan congresses would flourish, a national congress has not been held since 1941.

The tenth National Eucharistic Congress scheduled for 2024 in Indianapolis is an opportunity for the Catholic Church in the United States to resume the work begun long ago by Bishop Maes and the Priests’ Eucharistic League, Bishop Schrembs, and the numerous clergy, religious, and lay people who planned and participated in these events. The accounts of the nine national congresses display the growth of the Catholic Church in the United States over five decades; they also manifest Eucharistic congresses as singular forces for that growth. Fundamentally, these events are the Church at prayer, at study, and at work – in open ways that invite others to new life in Christ. 129 years after the first national congress and 83 since the last, the Eucharistic Revival is providential: the recovery of an inheritance; the advent of a renewal of eucharistic faith and practice; a “station” of the Church in the United States around the mystery of the Eucharist.

Further Reading

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- Revival: June 19, 2022 – June 8, 2025
- Diocesan Year: 2022–2023; Parish Year: 2023–2024; Year of Going Out on Mission: 2024–2025
- Tenth National Eucharistic Congress: Indianapolis, July 21–24, 2024
- EucharisticRevival.org