



Brief History of the Eucharistic Congress In the Archdiocese of Atlanta from 1996-2009

Eucharistic Renewal officially began in the Archdiocese of Atlanta on June 9, 1996, when Archbishop John F. Donoghue gathered an overflowing crowd of over a thousand people at Holy Spirit Church in Atlanta on the feast of Corpus Christi.

On this feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, the archbishop made the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist a focus for Catholics in North and Central Georgia. Through a variety of ways, people would be invited to renew their experience of Jesus in the Eucharist and deepen their understanding of church teaching about the Eucharist.

In addition to this Corpus Christi procession and liturgy in 1996, the archbishop formed a Eucharistic Renewal Committee, which drew on other dioceses' experience. Volunteers learned to lead "Life in the Eucharist" seminars, which combined personal witness with catechesis on the Eucharist. A perpetual adoration chapel at the Cathedral of Christ the King had been open for two years and was attracting many to pray there. At the Corpus Christi liturgy, Archbishop Donoghue asked for the prayers of the people for the next twelve months in particular that people who had lost their faith might receive the grace of conversion.

After spending a year drawing closer to the Lord Jesus, a crowd of 4,000 Catholics from parishes throughout the archdiocese gathered on Corpus Christi, June 1, 1997, at the Atlanta Civic Center for Mass and a healing service led by Sister Briege McKenna, OSC, and Father Kevin Scallon that focused on the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

When the feast of Corpus Christi arrived on June 14, 1998, Catholics gathered at the Cathedral of Christ the King. Father Richard Lopez was the homilist, telling the congregation that Catholics need to be ready to receive Christ in the Eucharist with "open hands, open hearts, an open tabernacle and an open monstrance."

Among the signs of response to the Eucharistic Renewal were the opening of more perpetual adoration chapels in parishes and the fact that dozens of parishes had begun holding weekly or monthly periods of adoration. Life in the Eucharist seminars continued to be presented in parishes all around north and central Georgia by lay volunteers.

In 1999 on the feast of Corpus Christi, Archbishop Donoghue gathered over 1,000 Catholics again at Holy Spirit Church with Father Benedict Groeschel, a Franciscan Friar of the Renewal, as the homilist. Father Groeschel spoke of the history of Catholic belief in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and of the popes and saints who found holiness through embracing this belief. He emphasized the Scriptural basis for this belief and the many Eucharistic miracles that have occurred over the centuries. The seed that was planted in 1996 was growing and devotion was spreading throughout the archdiocese.

Building upon the Eucharistic Renewal, Catholics were called to "go and make disciples" at the 2000 Corpus Christi liturgy by Father Jack Durkin and Father Brian Higgins who preached on June 25 at the Cathedral of Christ the King. In unison with the Jubilee Year of the Church, called by Pope John Paul II for the new millennium, Archbishop Donoghue announced a year of evangelization from June 2000 to June 2001. Calling this outreach "Come to Me," it was particularly directed to inactive Catholics. Parishes developed teams that either went door-to-door to invite people back or held programs for returning Catholics to come and be welcomed.

This full year of evangelization was celebrated on Corpus Christi 2001 with a larger event, a Eucharistic Congress, held at the old Georgia International Convention Center. A committee of volunteers

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guided by the archbishop who had planned the congress for months were amazed when 12,000 people came on June 16, 2001. Returning Catholics were encouraged to come and were welcomed. Speakers included Baltimore Cardinal William Keeler, Philadelphia Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, the preacher to Pope John Paul II, Father Raniero Cantalamessa, and Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput. This became the model for future congresses, with an opening Eucharistic procession of representatives from parishes, schools, ministries and Catholic institutions and a closing Mass for the Vigil of Corpus Christi. There were separate tracks for adults, teens and Hispanics, while all gathered for the closing Mass together. The archdiocese was also consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus at this Congress.

The following year, representatives of Pope John Paul II spoke at the 2002 Atlanta Eucharistic Congress, including Cardinal Jozef Tomko from Rome, Italy, and the pope's nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Gabriel Montalvo. An estimated 7,000 to 10,000 people came. More tracks were added for 850 children and for 400 middle-schoolers with their own catechesis and prayer times. About 1,000 teens came to their track and about 1,500 filled a Spanish-language track. The Congress closed with Archbishop Donoghue asking people to seek out the unchurched during the coming year and help them to know Jesus Christ.

In 2003 the Congress was moved to the new Georgia International Convention Center, where it has been held annually since then. Between 15,000 and 20,000 people attended. A Vietnamese track was added. Young adults in their 20s and 30s started a grassroots movement to have their own track, which was added on Friday night and called "Revive!" and drew 750. Over 4,000 Hispanics attended, along with 2,000 teens and 950 children.

In 2004 an estimated 23,000 people came to the Eucharistic Congress. The Hispanic presence increased to about 6,000, while teens numbered about 2,000 and children about 1,100. Speakers included Jeff Cavins, Raymond Arroyo, Marcellino D'Ambrosio, Deal Hudson, Christopher West and Alan Keyes, while Savannah Bishop J. Kevin Boland gave a homily and assisted in the liturgies.

Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory was installed as the Archbishop of Atlanta January 17, 2005. He continued the tradition of the Eucharistic Congress, which in 2005 overlapped with a universal Year of the Eucharist called for by the Pope. Showing continued vitality, the Congress drew about 25,000 people. For the first time, a healing Mass and healing service were incorporated into the schedule on Friday evening, in addition to the young adult track "Revive!" Sister Briege and Father Scallon guided the healing service as they had in 1997. Also, a track for the hearing-impaired and the deaf was added to the program in 2005 and has continued to be a valued part of the Congress ever since. Bishops of South Carolina and North Carolina were part of the Congress events in 2005.

In 2006, with the theme "Until He Comes," the Eucharistic Congress again drew over 25,000 people. Welcoming the diverse population of Catholics in the archdiocese, the Congress included a Mass and healing service on Friday evening, the young adult track, and on Saturday a general track, Hispanic track, Vietnamese track, teen track, children's track and track for the hearing-impaired and deaf. Over 8,000 attended the Spanish-language track. General track speakers included Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, Ireland.

"The Food That Endures for Eternal Life" was the theme chosen by Archbishop Gregory for the 2007 Eucharistic Congress drawing 30,000 Catholics from children to seniors. Over 600 volunteers assisted with the event that is now recognized throughout the country. Speakers included Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras and Archbishop Pietro Sambi, papal nuncio to the United States.

The 2008 Eucharistic Congress was held on June 20 & 21. Tens of thousands of Georgia's Catholics gathered to worship and celebrate the Eucharist under the theme, "I Am the Living Bread."

The 2009 Eucharistic Congress is scheduled for June 12 & 13 at the Georgia International Convention Center. This year's theme, "As Grain Once Scattered" was chosen by Archbishop Gregory from the Didache. Internationally known speakers have been invited to deliver inspirational talks on the Eucharist and New Media such as "Twitter and Facebook" was introduced for the first time to help reach younger audiences.

Excerpts gathered from the archives of *The Georgia Bulletin*.

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