



By [Ruth Graham](#)

Photographs by [Isadora Kosofsky](#)

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Lucas Oil Stadium, the vast brick home to the Indianapolis Colts, is space custom-built for commotion and cacophony. On Wednesday night, the seats were mostly filled, families having shuffled into rows balancing paper trays of chicken fingers and pizza. But at 7 p.m., the lights went down, and the crowd sat poised in stillness and silence.

Then a voice on the loudspeaker instructed them to kneel, a spotlight beamed to a corner of the floor.

As tens of thousands of people watched, the stadium spotlight shone on a four-foot, elaborate star-shaped gold vessel that contained the simple wafer that Catholics believe becomes the true presence of Jesus Christ when it is consecrated.

At that instant, Camille Anigbogu, 22, from Houston, recalled later, “I profoundly knew that it was God.”

Ms. Anigbogu was among the American Catholics who gathered for an event designed to revive popular fervor for the sacrament of the Holy Communion and to be a “generational moment” for the Church more broadly. It was the first National Eucharistic Congress since the 1940s — brought back in response to American bishops’ dismay that Catholics have been drifting from the ritual at the core of each Mass, and from their faith altogether.



Father Boniface Hicks of the Saint Vincent Archabbey in Pennsylvania carrying the holy vessel at the National Eucharistic Congress.



Incense wafted through Lucas Oil Stadium.

In the stadium on Wednesday, Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minn., held the gold vessel, called a monstrance, aloft. Then he slowly proceeded to an altar on the stadium floor, where the receptacle stayed for an hour as the focus of prayer and singing, ranging from 13th-century Latin hymns to contemporary worship songs.

Later, attendees described a feeling of peace and euphoria, and a confirmation of the [centrality of the sacrament to their faith](#). Catholic doctrine refers to the eucharist as “the source and summit of the Christian life.” Consuming bread and wine is the climax of every Mass; the church’s claim that the substances “transubstantiate” distinguishes Catholicism from other forms of Christianity. Many at the congress referred to the vessel’s contents not as “it” but as “him.”

“Jesus was telling me, ‘Look at all these people, 50,000 people are here and they love me and I love them all,’” said Joshua Paul Viola, 26, a photographer who traveled to the congress from Alabama.

The first Eucharistic Congress in the United States took place in the late 19th century, although early meetings were attended mostly by clergy. In 1930, leaders issued a national invitation to lay Catholics to attend a rally and procession in Omaha. In Cleveland five years later, more than 80,000 attended.

Shortly after the ninth congress in 1941, however, the United States entered World War II, disrupting future plans. A large International Eucharistic Congress was held in Philadelphia in the 1970s, but there were no other national gatherings devoted to the sacrament until this one, which stretches over five days.

The congress opened in what turned out to be a moment of extraordinary anxiety in the country outside the stadium walls, and within the church itself, as Mass attendance declines and Catholics bicker over differences in their politics and liturgical tastes. It arrived days after an assassination attempt on a former president, and as the current president’s health became the subject of mounting scrutiny.

The gathering concludes on Sunday, after a packed schedule that has included morning liturgies, opportunities for confession, high-profile speakers like the [popular podcaster and priest Mike Schmitz](#), a procession through downtown Indianapolis on Saturday afternoon, and an expo hall with wares including Lego priest sets and bottles for holy water reminiscent of high-end perfume.

The crowd reflected the diversity of Catholic life in America. Masses were offered in Vietnamese, Spanish and Latin, with liturgies drawn from different sources including the Syro-Malabar Church, based in India. Some wore their Sunday best, with women in long skirts and lace mantillas, while others sported jeans and T-shirts with slogans like “Got Mary?”

American bishops started planning the gathering years ago, spending \$22 million for the project and initially aiming to attract 80,000 worshipers. A touchstone was World Youth Day in 1993, when Pope John Paul II [received a rock star’s welcome](#) from a teeming crowd of young Catholics in Denver’s Mile High Stadium.

The week in Indianapolis turned out to be more modest. Pope Francis did not attend, for one, although he sent his good wishes and blessed the large gold monstrance that was ferried into the stadium each night.

The Catholic Church itself is also a smaller presence in American life than it was in the last century. Waves of departures followed revelations in the early 2000s of widespread sexual abuse by clergy, and the broader culture has become more secular.

Then came a survey in 2019 that seemed to put the sprawling predicament of disaffiliations and disaffection into focus: Only [one-third of Catholics](#) in the United States believe that the bread and wine of the eucharist transform into the body and blood of Jesus during Mass, the Pew Research Center found. (A later survey commissioned by the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame [questioned Pew's approach](#) and suggested the problem was not quite not as dire.)

The finding deeply alarmed American bishops, but it also presented an opportunity.

They launched a three-year “Eucharistic revival” in 2022, of which the congress serves as a centerpiece. The effort, chaired by Bishop Cozzens, also tapped into a revived interest in eucharistic adoration — a meditative practice of sitting in what adherents see as the presence of Jesus — among young traditionally minded Catholics.

“Adoration is back,” said Marina Frattaroli, 26, one of a select group of young Catholics pilgrims (including Ms. Anigbogu) who spent the last two months walking and driving to Indianapolis across the country along four paths starting in Lake Itasca, Minn., at the headwaters of the Mississippi; New Haven, Conn.; Brownsville, Texas, and San Francisco.

Ms. Frattaroli was raised Presbyterian and converted to Catholicism in 2022, after reading about the revival prompted her to grapple with her theological beliefs. She recently graduated from Columbia Law School and said that a chapel near campus had a steady stream of students at its weekday adoration times.

She participated in the pilgrimage’s Eastern route. Pilgrims carried a vessel in public processions along the way, joined by local Catholics. In St. Paul, Minn., about 7,000 people joined the procession downtown. Along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the pilgrims led a miles-long procession on the beach. In Atlanta, a largely Vietnamese parish treated them to a meal and a night of karaoke.

The congress in Indianapolis was billed as an occasion for spiritual unity and peace, even before the chaotic political season agitated the country’s already fraying mood.

“We’re here at this moment at a time where our country seems to be almost at the threads,” said Sister Josephine Garrett, a nun and podcaster who spoke on the main stage on Friday night. “I think that’s providential.”

Partisan politics was largely absent from the stadium, although speakers on the main stage included the anti-abortion activist Lila Rose and Sister Bethany Madonna of the Sisters of Life, an order devoted to “the protection of human life,” including discouraging abortion.

Still, many attendees could not disentangle their search for deeper faith and the uncertainties swirling around this tumultuous American summer.

Alex Trotter, 45, traveled to the event from Oakland, Calif., with the oldest three of his nine children, along with his wife and a few other family members. His oldest son, 20, is in the process of determining whether he wants to be a priest.

Mr. Trotter said he has been on a “journey” the last few years that included a crisis in his marriage, a rediscovery of his faith and a revisiting of his political instincts. He voted for Mr. Biden in 2020, and his wife voted for Mr. Trump. This year, he plans to let prayer guide him, and he may not vote at all.

Standing on the sidewalk outside the congress, he took in the crowds of his fellow Catholics streaming past him. He could feel his faith growing stronger even since his arrival, he said. His thoughts about his family and the state of the world were all connected, “and God is at the center of all of them,” he said.



Young people stood and sang along to “Praise the Lord, Oh my Soul.”