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Diocese to Collaborate in Ignited by Truth 2009

Seven years ago, the preparation for the first Ignited by Truth (IBT) Catholic Conference was short, quick and intense; it was a flurry of emails and phone calls and pleas for speakers, volunteers and donations that culminated in a literal flurry of snow and ice as more than 650 braved the weather and streamed into Cardinal Gibbons High School in Raleigh.

The intervening years have not lowered either the intensity or the excitement levels of the primary organizers, Christine Sulzen of Apex and Ursula Ruiz of Raleigh. The mission remains the same: To bring to light the truth of the teachings of the Catholic Church and to ignite in the hearts of the attendees a renewed love for the faith. But preparation begins earlier and is more streamlined; it consists of Excel spreadsheets and expandable file folders, official letterhead and steps of systematic progress.

But for the 2009 conference, Sulzen and Ruiz are preparing for the greatest changes yet. For the first time, the Diocese of Raleigh is collaborating in the planning. And because the conference has outgrown its high school locale, the preparation this year includes moving to a new venue at the Convention Center in downtown Raleigh.

And there's a new target for attendance, up from the 1,200 at the last conference: 3,200 souls.

The 2009 conference is scheduled for Feb. 13-14. Speakers thus far include:

- Immaculee Ilibagiza, "Story of Faith, Hope and Forgiveness" – Ilibagiza, a native Rwandan, survived her nation's genocide by hiding in a pastor's bathroom for 91 days. She lost most of her family, but she survived to share the story and her miraculous transition into forgiveness and a profound relationship with God. She is the author of "Left to Tell."
- Joseph Pearce, "The Evangelizing Power of Beauty" – Twenty years ago Pearce was a radical activist, a skinhead, and the editor of two hate-filled, extremist magazines. Today the English-born author of several best-selling biographies of great nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christian authors is a professor of literature at Ave Maria University in Naples, Fla.
- Tim Staples, "Catholics and the Culture War" – Raised Southern Baptist and a former youth minister in an Assembly of God community, Staples converted to Catholicism in 1988 and works in Catholic apologetics and evangelization.

Bishop Michael Burbidge will celebrate the conference's closing Mass at 5:30 p.m. on Saturday. "This event is an opportunity for the faithful of our Diocese to join together in prayer, worship, and catechesis," said Bishop Burbidge. "The invited speakers are known for their loyal commitment to the Church and her teaching and will offer a variety of formation activities that will inspire and educate. I am confident that the conference, with God's grace, will yield abundant blessings and I urge as many people as possible from our Diocese to attend."

In the beginning

Each year, about 40 percent of the conference attendees are newcomers. In their emails and mailings Ruiz and Sulzen highlight this evangelizing component of IBT by asking, "Who will you invite this year?"

IBT's original incarnation was as a conference for homeschoolers. It evolved into IBT as plans for the homeschool conference fell through, but Ruiz and Sulzen – casual acquaintances at the time – joined forces and persevered after concluding that the conference was not meant to be for homeschoolers

only; it was supposed to be for everyone.

"It was almost like we were holding hands and jumping off a cliff," said Sulzen. "The pressure was incredible, but the zeal for souls kept us going."

They had just over 100 days to plan and no idea how many people would show up. The 650 who came made it clear that there was a hunger for the conference's mission, a love and desire for the Church and her teachings.

Despite growing family responsibilities – Ruiz is the mother of three, Sulzen of five. Both mothers homeschool, and both are active in their parishes – they still feel called to serve. "That's what we were called to do, so God gives us the time," said Ruiz. "He makes time, so you're not as tired when you stay up to two a.m."

As IBT joins the Diocese's lineup of spiritual and formational activities, it also gives the conference a wider pool for participants. Sister Rose Marie Adams, I.H.M., director of Evangelization and Catechesis, said that the Diocese is promoting IBT through parish faith formation directors and at large gatherings like the Emmaus Conference and at a conference of Catholic school teachers.

"The Diocese offers many opportunities to grow in our faith and our love of Jesus Christ -- conferences, workshops and retreat days," said Sister Rose Marie. Ignited by Truth, she said, is one more way that people of the diocese can "live, love and practice their faith."

The women view IBT as a gift to the Diocese. "We want it to be self-sustaining," said Ruiz. "We want to encourage the endorsement and support of the Diocese, yet maintain the support and involvement of the laity."

To appeal to the broadest demographic of Catholics, Ruiz and Sulzen look for speakers in a diversity of areas, such as conversion, apologetics, holiness, faith in action, and a topic appealing to parents, such as a discussion of *Theology of the Body*.

"We pray over the list of potential speakers," said Sulzen, "and see what gifts they have and how they fit into the mission. We let God lead the way."

It helps that they now they have a known entity; IBT has garnered national attention, and with names like George Weigel, Patrick Madrid and Janet Smith on their past rosters, it has become easier to approach other important figures in Catholic culture with invitations.

Pearce will open this year's conference on Saturday at 9 am. A teen track will run concurrently. Throughout the day ministry booths and Catholic vendors will display materials and items for sale.

As always, a free Friday evening program is open to everyone and will feature Staples and Pearce, the former addressing "Why be Catholic?" and the latter sharing his story in "Race with the Devil: From Racial Hatred to the Love of Christ." Saturday afternoon students ten and above are welcome to participate in special student breakout sessions.

If the conference touches just one soul, Ruiz and Sulzen said, it is worth it.

They have faced challenges before, such as ice storms and flat tires, injuries and last-minute crises. They have always turned to their faith for restoration and inspiration. Charged with increasing the attendance so significantly, they are encouraging their supporters more than ever to "storm heaven" and to "pray and sacrifice and share resources."

They claim, perhaps not so jokingly, that no laundry gets done in their households between Thanksgiving and February. They rely on a network of volunteers, many of whom have been involved since the very first days, and on supportive husbands, families and friends.

"It's incredible," said Ruiz. "Of everyone involved, they all have bigger job responsibilities, more apostolate, all the families have more children – yet they still feel called to serve Ignited by Truth."

They don't talk about their involvement with Ignited by Truth without pointing to all the souls behind the

scenes, the more than 200 volunteers who have helped with every conference and who do everything from baking cookies to setting up chairs to driving speakers to and from the airport. Especially critical are the many priests who have supported and attended IBT to hear confessions and celebrate Mass.

Through it all, Ruiz and Sulzen said that their faith and their love of the Church assures them that they are where God wants them to be, doing what God wants them to do. When they find they are worried about money, money arrives. When they need help, help comes.

At such moments, said Ruiz, "It's like God saying 'Go.'"

"There are people who could do a far better job," said Ruiz. "There are people who could be far more organized, who know the speakers, who could do a far better job running an event. We just do it out of a love for Christ."

Questions? Suggestions? Send to ncc@raldioc.org

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