

Super Bowl champion's rallying cry: 'We need to step up and be men' and defend life

George Goss | Catholic Herald Multimedia Journalist

Themed "Power Within: The Secret Strength of a Deeper Interior Life," the annual diocesan men's conference featured keynote speaker Matt Birk, a Super Bowl champion and pro-life advocate, and Father Donald Haggerty, the erstwhile spiritual director of Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity. Both men stressed the importance of Catholic men actively living out their faith in the public square during their addresses to the crowd of 700 gathered at St. Joseph Church in Herndon March 9.

"You can take pride in the fact that the Catholic Church since day one has been unequivocally pro-life, so it's almost required that if you say you're a Catholic you should be once a month outside of a Planned Parenthood praying or offering up a holy hour or a rosary for the unborn and the people who work at Planned Parenthood," Birk said in response to a question from an attendee about how to combat



recent pro-abortion legislation initiatives in New York and Virginia.

Birk is no stranger to taking a public stand against abortion. In 2013, he declined an invite to the White House from then President Barack Obama after he and his Baltimore Ravens teammates won the Super Bowl. It was a protest move following President Obama's statement: "God bless Planned Parenthood."

"The main reason we are excited to have Matt Birk here is because

of his strong motivation to witness to the pro-life movement and for him to share his experience of living the faith in the public square. He and Father Haggerty are showing us how to be confident Catholics —

confident because we are standing up for the truth," said Nico Panlican, men's ministry coordinator of the Office of Marriage, Family and Respect Life, which sponsored the conference.

During a panel discussion in which Birk was joined by Bishop Michael F. Burbidge and Father Haggerty, the 6-foot-4-inch former Ravens center encouraged each man gathered to do something to defend life.

"We need to step up and be men. Abortion is one of those things that's diminished and hurt women," he said.

The father of eight then passed the mic to Bishop Burbidge, the homilist for Mass, which served as the midway point of the conference.

"Like all of you, my reaction to legislation in New York and here in Virginia is outrage. It's unbelievable that we've reached a point where



we're now talking about late-term abortions and even after the baby comes out of the womb," Bishop Burbidge said.

He went on to recommend prayer, witness and advocacy as three positive steps to defend life.

"We are not just citizens, we have to be faithful citizens and that means we have to take our faith — it is not an option, it is a mandate — we have to take our faith into the public arena and shape it, especially with our elected officials who are so distorted in what they are saying," he said.

Father Haggerty, the other keynote speaker, gave numerous



examples of tenacious witnessing to the faith by Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity. He told of one sister martyred in Yemen by Islamic extremists who walked toward the gunman in a last-minute, heroic attempt to save her fellow sisters.

"Mother Teresa had a saying, 'Give whatever he takes, and take whatever he gives,'" Father Haggerty said, in answer to a question about how to surrender spiritually to God in all circumstances.

Bishop Burbidge closed the panel with statements of encouragement.

"We can end on a positive note even though we are talking about a subject like this. One reason is men like you," he said. "The fact that you've given this day to the Lord

and you want to do what is good, holy and just. This is a reason to be hope filled. Many of you go to the March for Life, I go every year and I see the young people and they get it. I see their zeal, their commitment and their enthusiasm

and I think that they're going to be the ones helping us bring about a transformation, but we have to encourage one another in the faith, because it is a battle. But as Jesus promised, the truth will always win. Thank God we are on the side of



truth and on the side of life. Thank you men for your witness."

For attendees, the conference proved an opportunity to be inspired by the speakers — and each other.

Tim Smith, a parishioner of All Saints Church in Manassas, cited camaraderie as the main reason for his eagerness to attend.

"Iron sharpens iron as the old saying goes, and being around other men trying to grow in holiness helps," Smith said.

Eric Rossi, a parishioner of St. Michael Church in Annandale, was inspired by Birk's pro-life witness.

"I think it's fantastic that he had the courage to stand up for what he believes in despite a hostile public opinion," Rossi said. "It also shows people who hold the opposing view that we are serious about defending life."