

Parishioners' Corner

A 100th Anniversary Worth Remembering



In June 1926, which stadium was the site of an outdoor Mass attended by an estimated 150,000 persons inside the stadium - and another 150,000 outside?

If you replied, “Soldier Field, Chicago,” you are correct! And you score extra credit points if you added that the Chicago Bears did not play their first game in Soldier Field until November 1926.

The occasion for this extraordinary outdoor Mass was the 28th International Eucharistic Congress, June 20-24, 1926, hosted by the Archdiocese of Chicago. It is challenging to find words that adequately describe the monumental scope and colossal attendance at the Congress as well as the incredible boldness (some might say “audacity”) of George Cardinal Mundelein who convinced the Pope to approve Chicago as the host city.

Mundelein, who was in his early 50s and had been a cardinal for only two years, fearlessly approached Pope Pius XI and convinced him that the U.S. was no longer “mission territory” and that Chicago was not an unsophisticated “wild west” city. At its time, this International Congress in Chicago was the largest body of Church leaders ever to convene outside of Rome.

A reliable report estimated that 800,000 visitors came to Chicago for the Congress. With pilgrims filling every hotel in the area, some visitors spent nights in Pullman sleeping cars parked in Chicago rail yards. In addition, Catholics across the city hosted visitors in their homes. A representative of Pope Pius XI attended the Congress as well as bishops from China and New Zealand. Closer to home, more than 900 Catholics from Mexico, including many priests, arrived on chartered trains.

The opening Mass for the Congress at Holy Name Cathedral featured liturgical music by The Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The following day was the centerpiece: Mass at Soldier Field with 300,000 faithful present. Then, the next day, there was a Children’s Mass at Soldier Field, with a specially trained (mostly by nuns) choir of 60,000 students.

In addition, there was a Women’s Day Mass, attended by 250,000 women, including 20,000 nuns. One choir featured more than 6,000 nuns; another, 3,500 women from local church groups. In addition, during the multi-day event, more than 3,000 priests were especially designated to hear confessions.

On the final day, several local railroad companies dispatched trains to the suburb of Mundelein every two minutes for a Mass on the seminary grounds. After the Mass, there was a two-mile procession that followed a three-mile route in the area. Observers said that it was nothing short of miraculous that the transportation and crowd arrangement logistics for this emboldened excursion were successfully and safely managed.

Cardinal Mundelein was particularly proud that the Congress did not accept business funding, but rather this event was supported by the Catholic faithful.

Of laudable significance, Cardinal Mundelein and the leaders of the Congress emphatically underscored that the spectacular grandeur of the events were not meant to overshadow its primary purpose, namely, the enthronement of the sacramental Christ in the hearts of its visitors and Chicagoans. The amazing story and the tremendous number of participants in various events were carefully compiled in a 500+ page report published by the Committee for the Congress.

The 1926 International Eucharistic Congress was an epic moment for all Chicagoans. What’s more, it was a faith-filled, inspirational, and never-to-be-forgotten event for Chicago Catholics.

From the Archives of the Archdiocese of Chicago; University of Saint Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary

