



Congress 2009: Energy and spirit despite tough times

By Mike Nelson

Contributing to this story were Doris Benavides, Paula Doyle and Sister Nancy Munro, CSJ.

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Challenged mightily by economic storms that have created "an extended Lent," Catholics at the 2009 Religious Education Congress were encouraged to seize this unique opportunity, to reject "business as usual" and to develop "a common good culture" that is based in Catholic social teaching.

"Our goal cannot be to get back to business as usual," said Sojourners founder Jim Wallis in his Congress keynote address Feb. 28 in the Anaheim Convention Center. "We have to say, 'No, we want a new direction. We've tried the greed culture, and it hasn't worked.' We need to create something new, a common good culture, rooted in compassion."



Sponsored by the archdiocesan Office of Religious Education, the four-day Congress, beginning with Youth Day on Feb. 26 (see page 6), drew close to 40,000 attendees who participated in close to 300 workshops (some in Spanish, Vietnamese and Korean), more than a dozen liturgies and a variety of special musical and spiritual events.

That included Wallis' talk on "The Opportunity of Crisis," alluding to the severe economic downturn worldwide that has nonetheless, he insisted, offered Christians the chance to make known to the world "who we are, to clarify our mission" as disciples of Jesus Christ.

He noted he has found a particular yearning in, of all places, the business community for spiritual guidance. He spoke at a recent World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland --- "not my usual crowd," he smiled --- to address the moral values of market capitalism, and found a rapt audience of CEOs and other financial leaders.

Clearly, he said, "We are in a social and spiritual crisis. We seem to have forgotten some key values. The common good hasn't been part of our decision making; we've thought that there is no need for virtue in that process. But all this pain, the misery we've endured, will be in vain unless we learn how to live in a new way. We need to learn new habits of the heart."

The opulence of the 1920s that preceded the Great Depression has repeated itself, Wallis asserted. "When we create a cultural habit of spending what we don't have for what we don't need, disaster isn't far away," he stated. "Our own good is tied up in the common good. And there is no greater example of this than Catholic social teaching. I am here to tell you, as Catholics, your time has come."

Wallis' talk in a packed Convention Center Arena drew favorable comments from Carol Carrig, IHM, 76, director of the Immaculate Heart Community Center for Spiritual Renewal, Santa Barbara.

"His world view, his spirituality and his concern for social justice is so important, and he articulated it so well," said Carrig, 76, who also attended a Wallis workshop. "And it was very heartening to see that there are young people who are interested in social justice as well."

Social justice was the theme of many booths in the Congress exhibit area.

"We've had more business this year than ever before," said David Kennedy, co-chair of the archdiocesan gay and lesbian ministry. "We've had to make extra flyers because we keep running out."

Among the many people visiting their booth were confirmation teachers who get questions from teens about how to respond to gay peers. Kennedy's advice: "Everyone is a child of God --- start there."

Laura Ash, music director at St. Patrick Church in Seattle and attending her eighth Congress, enjoyed the Feb. 28 Celtic liturgy, "a chance for me to be nourished as an assembly member, rather than at work planning a liturgy. Part of what I continually learn is that we have to have a balance: you have to have work but you also have to have play, you have to lead but you also have to let yourself be led, you have to serve but let yourself be served."

"It is always great to be here," said Raquel Pinchinatti, a parishioner and confirmation teacher at St. Dominic Savio Church in Bellflower. "It is a great joy to see how the youth has the call to serve God."

Pinchinatti has attended Congress for the last five years together with a group of ladies from her church. She heard about the event through fellow parishioner Maria Marquez, who attended Congress for the first time 25 years ago, when there were fewer workshops in Spanish.

"It is so good to have those workshops in Spanish because religious education is very important for Hispanics so that we can grow as a community and do a better contribution to this society," she said.

Greg Mark of Sacramento, who formerly taught at Chaminade University in Hawaii, attended his first Congress with fiancée Christina Fa of Sunnyvale where she attends St. Martin Church. "This is very exciting," said Mark, who plans to become Catholic. "There's a very warm, spiritual feeling."

Mickey and Seonaid Sanders of St. Joseph the Worker Church in Victoria, British Columbia, have attended Congress for 20 years. "It's inspiring and a shot in the arm for our Catholicism," said Seonaid, who said their home diocese is noticeably more conservative. "This is very uplifting, the multi-cultural events, the quality speakers --- there's nothing like it in Canada. To see liturgical dance, a woman presider this morning at the prayer service - all these things are very opening and very welcoming."

In her opening talk Feb. 27, Religious Sister of Charity Edith Prendergast, ORE director, noted that "It is possible for us to have a new kind of world - a world where there is more caring, more thought for others, more laughter, more joy, more sharing of our resources. But we must be willing to make the changes in our lifestyles and practices that will ensure a better world, a better place for all, a world oriented toward healing and away from destruction."

Sister Prendergast spoke of the "bitter frosts" in today's world facing everyone --- "the cutbacks, the diminished returns, the sharp edges, the fear of what might lie ahead. It is in these bleak and lean times that we must beg our God to shed light in our darkness."

"As catechetical leaders and pastoral ministers, we are privileged indeed to prepare the soil so that all can come to experience this great showing of God's love. Our ministry is to help unfold the treasures of the Word

to the whole community so that they can have a fresh encounter with Jesus. It is up to each one of us gathered here to renew our effort, to savor the words, to allow it to change our hearts - so important in today's world."

In addressing Sunday's Scripture reading of Jesus' temptation in the desert, Cardinal Roger Mahony compared the recent sex abuse scandal case to this year's "new intensity" of Lent in his closing liturgy homily March 1.

"The church scandal went on year after year. Finally, it got settled and slowly but surely that Lent began to recede into the past," he said. "This Lent is a far different reality than the previous years because of the economy. There are problems swirling around us in the desert: fewer jobs, less benefits, fear of losing our job, the company, the house, or children's safety."

To overcome adversity, the cardinal encouraged the assembly to draw energy by recalling the gift of their baptism.

"Like Jesus, we are driven into the desert to be tempted by Satan, left vulnerable without resources of our own to overcome difficulties," he said. "Left to our own devices, it can be miserable.

"But that desert experience is not what the Holy Spirit wants for you or for me. Remember that it is through the power of baptism that we gain identity with Jesus to find a way to carry those burdens."

He urged the assembly "to pray for one another, to be there for one another, and to journey together in peace."

Youth Day: 15,000 teens 'step up to life' in Anaheim

Story and photos by Doris Benavides
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Thousands of teenagers together paying close attention for close to an hour to what is being said from the pulpit may not happen often. But at noon Feb. 26, a pin drop could have been heard on the floor in an Anaheim Convention Center Arena filled to capacity with some 7,500 high school youth.

The same was happening at two other Convention Center venues, where another 7,500 teens were assembled for midday liturgies at the Education Congress Youth Day. The reason?



"We are here to meet other people and to learn more about God," said 15-year-old Ginachakija Amah and Chester Day, as they arrived, accompanied by their chaperone and confirmation teacher, Society Devoted to the Sacred Heart Sister Frances Kennedy, from Cathedral Chapel in Los Angeles.

The duo spoke for thousands. Fellowshiping, evangelization and spiritual and faith empowerment were the main purposes of the event that the Archdiocese of Los Angeles has sponsored for the last consecutive 42 years.

"This is all about the community," said Mike Norman, associate director of the Archdiocese's Office of Religious Education, who for the last 14 years has overseen the event that kicks off the annual Congress. Youth Day annually sells out well ahead of time, and has expanded to accommodate 15,000, some attending from Nevada, Arizona, Hawaii and Alaska as well as California.

"We want to help young people see that church is much bigger than their youth ministry program and that church even, is much bigger than that," Norman told The Tidings. "Students feel empowered in their faith and they go back excited about church."

The excitement began with energetic keynote speaker Valimar Jansen entering the Arena stage dancing to the rhythm of drums, setting the tone. She challenged the audience to step up to three challenges: daily dedication of three minutes of silence to God, learning one line of Scripture during Lent, and using their cell phones to send a daily spiritual message.

Diego Cruz, 14, a member of South Gate's St. Helen Church, said he will accept the challenges, although he admits memorizing Scripture verses will be challenging because he has to keep up with a lot of homework every day. His youth minister, Jose Gonzalez, 26, said the parish will do a follow-up with activities that involve reading and learning Scripture.

At the Arena liturgy, Cardinal Roger Mahony introduced two youths to share their tough life experiences and how their involvement in church helped them find a way out. "We are not in this journey alone," he told the youth.

He encouraged them to love, help and inspire each other by inviting God into their lives. "When we do for ourselves and for one another, we too will be stepping up to life," Cardinal Mahony said.

As he has done in previous years in his Youth Day homily, the cardinal took the opportunity to promote vocations. "The church needs more priests, sisters and brothers because there are more Catholics to serve," he said, and he asked those who have heard a "whisper from our Lord" to stand up.

Bakersfield's Leah Altman, 18, from St. Philip the Apostle Church, was one of close to 30 youth who stood up in the packed Arena. The oldest of three siblings who are home-schooled by their divorced mother, Altman said that for a year she has started to seriously consider becoming a nun. Her mother was shocked when she told her two weeks ago, but told her she will support her in her decision. And her 15-year old sister Hannah thinks her decision is "cool," she said, though she admitted she is still afraid to tell her father.

Not coincidentally, veteran youth minister Mike Patin from Lafayette, Louisiana, told the teens in his workshop, "Fearles Faith Freaks," that challenges await for those who believe in God.

"Someone is going to look at us a little different after we leave this place," he told the attentive audience after telling them that each one had a "freak" sitting next to them. And, like all the day's speakers, he reiterated the importance of believing in a God who loves them just as they are.

While the workshops have a catechetical content, Norman believes Youth Day is more about evangelization. "Young people who attend see how excited other people are," he said, "and then that excitement builds and they feel supported because when they go back to their parishes their coordinators keep it up."

The event, attended by both Catholic and non-Catholic students, is prepared by a coordinating team, including teenagers, that started the planning in April 2008. They chose the theme, "Step Up to Life," after reflecting on

the day's Scripture reading, and analyzing church and world events. They also selected workshop topics and speakers.

International array of speakers/catechists expected in Anaheim

By Paula Doyle
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More than 40,000 people are expected for the internationally acclaimed Los Angeles Religious Education Congress March 1-4 at the Anaheim Convention Center, the largest catechetical conference of its kind in the U.S.

Its "Stand in the Light" theme "nudges us to bask in the incredible radiance of a God whose glory and brightness penetrates everyone, everything and everywhere," says Religious Sister of Charity Edith Prendergast, director of the archdiocesan office of religious education sponsoring the annual event.

Kicking off with "Live out Love" Youth Day March 1, Congress' spirited opening rite of prayer and song March 2 will feature Cardinal Roger Mahony and a host of liturgical ministers. Over 280 workshops covering biblical studies, catechesis, spirituality, social justice, music and personal development will be offered over the course of the weekend in addition to 14 Eucharistic Liturgies reflecting the multicultural diversity of the archdiocese.

Scores of experts will address catechetical and contemporary church issues, with not a few speaking on the future of parish ministry, according to Sister Prendergast. Keynote morning speakers include Divine Word Father Bryan Massingale, who will talk March 3 on the challenges of becoming beacons of hope in a secular society, and anti-poverty activist Jim Wallis, who will explore the impact of spiritual revival on social change March 4.

Several speakers will address emerging parish leadership models. They include Deacon William Ditewig, USCCB Secretariat director for its Diaconate and Evangelization offices, who will discuss the evolving role of deacons in the contemporary church, and St. Joseph of Carondelet Sister Carol Quinlivan and Father Jim Clarke from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, who will co-lead a workshop on alternative models of leadership such as parish life directors.

First-time international Congress speakers include Jesuit Father Michael Paul Gallagher, theology professor at the Gregorian University in Rome, discussing the impact of culture on faith, and Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, leading a workshop on the place of religion in a technological society. Edwina Gateley, internationally known speaker, author and advocate for marginalized women, will appear at this year's Congress with stories of Biblical and contemporary women's faith journeys.

Global images will surround Congress participants. Catholic Relief Services will present a hands-on interactive exhibit on international AIDS orphans on the ground floor. A nearby art exhibit will feature photos of children and adults from Brazil, India, Jamaica and Kenya taken by documentary filmmaker Gerard Thomas Straub as well as inspirational paintings of "Jesus --- The Way, The Truth, The Life," by Brother Michael O'Neill McGrath.

Multi-cultural exhibits representing several of the ethnic ministries in the archdiocese will be displayed on the second level of the Convention Center. Congress' popular "Sacred Space" area, offering Eucharistic adoration, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, a labyrinth, meditative music and inspirational art, will be housed this year on the center's third level.

Lunchtime entertainment will take place both in the arena and Hall B. Comedian and character-actor Doug Brummel debuts at Congress this year with his one-man show, "Lighten Up!" scheduled March 4 for arena lunchtime entertainment. Evening music concerts include "Fiesta," featuring leading Latino composers and artists, on March 2 and "Light the Night," presenting contemporary liturgical artists in a program of song, dance and ritual on March 3.

Some of Congress' special events at hotels adjacent to the Convention Center include a young adult dance at the Marriott March 3 from 9:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. and the premiere of the Catholic Hollywood Film Showcase in Anaheim Hilton Hotel's Pacific Room A the evenings of March 2-3 from 8-10:30 p.m.

The Film Showcase will screen films, documentaries and an animated short, "The Very First Noel," from Catholic production companies. Produced by Jesuit Father Ron Schmidt and Congress Choir music director John Flaherty, the film showcase will screen films from seven companies: Pluma Productions, Loyola Productions, Family Theater Productions, Paulist Productions, Mud Puddle Films, Hope Media Productions and the San Damiano Foundation.

The Congress film showcase was inspired by positive reaction to the screening of a short film co-produced by Father Schmidt for the 2005 World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany. The purpose of the showcase, according to Father Schmidt, is to expose Catholics to the work of the Catholic film community in Hollywood that is growing in impact and influence.

"Film is the primary cultural influence of our age, and Catholics need to be there," said Father Schmidt.