

Congress 2004: A zeal for faith education

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With their faith in God and belief in community, Catholic catechists, clergy and religious from around the country converged in Anaheim Feb. 19-22 to draw upon one another's experience as they lead the effort to reform and renew an embattled American church.

The theme of this year's Religious Education Congress, "Steeped in Mercy, Balm for the World," highlighted the need for forgiveness and reconciliation as Catholics minister inside the church and outside in the world. Nearly 39,000 people participated in hundreds of Congress workshops including more than 12,000 youth on Youth Day Feb. 19. Msgr. Ray East of Washington, D.C. expressed sentiments felt by many when he loudly proclaimed during the Feb. 20 gathering service: "I need Congress this year!"

During the service, Religious Sister of Charity Edith Prendergast, director of the archdiocesan Office of Religious Education, emphasized how Catholics are "called to be a healing presence, a balm" to a world in need.

"Though we are in darkness, the dawn will come," she said. But God challenges the faithful as Catholics grapple with the clergy sex abuse crisis, mindful of the Feb. 27 release of a national report on sex abuse in the Catholic Church.

"What kind of God wrestles with us?" Sister Prendergast asked the arena audience. A God of mercy, yes, but "mercy is not a weak or insipid love," she said; it is a "challenging mercy. It is the trials that bring us closer to God."

Among the scores of Congress speakers were Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle of the Diocese of Imus, the Philippines; Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez of San Salvador, El Salvador; Bishop Malcolm McMahon of Nottingham, England; Immaculate Heart Sister Nancy Sylvester, founder of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue; and St. Joseph of Carondelet Sister Anne Bryan Smollin, director of Counseling for Laity in New York.

Authentic renewal

During the Feb. 21 keynote theologian Dr. Richard Gaillardetz addressed "Being Authentically Church in Challenging Times."

"Insofar as the church is a human institution, it will always be in need of reform and renewal," said Gaillardetz, author of "By What Au-



BLESSING — Cardinal Roger Mahony prepares to dismiss catechumens and candidates at the closing liturgy of the Religious Education Congress in Anaheim Feb. 22.

thority?: A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful," published by Liturgical Press.

Reflecting on "*Unitatis Redintegratio*," the Vatican II document on ecumenism, he added that authentic renewal is grounded in an increase of fidelity to the church's own calling — "our becoming more what God calls us to be."

Gaillardetz observed that Pope John Paul II has urged the faithful towards a greater awareness of the triune God dwelling within each person and the call of the church to be

the "home and school of communion."

"So many of us cultivate a spirituality of desperately trying to increase the number of God moments in our lives," said Gaillardetz. "What a spirituality of communion calls us to is a discovery of the God who is always already there, and a recognition that communion with God can never be separated from communion with one another. We must be able to encounter God in our relationships with one another."

Such a spirit of hospitality means "making room for people whose viewpoints are different from your own," he added. "It's the courage to listen before we condemn."

The Feb. 22 morning addresses centered on evangelization in a pluralistic world and were given in English, Spanish and Vietnamese by R. Scott Appleby, Victor H. Escalante and Orange Auxiliary Bishop

Dominic Luong, respectively.

Appleby, professor of history and director of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Chicago, said that living in a religiously plural world with increasingly secular societies does not excuse Catholics from engaging in inter-religious dialogue or discourse in the public arena.

Bishop Luong urged Vietnamese Catholics to share their "treasure" of faith with the local church. In a world where 60 percent of the population lives in Asia — with Catholics comprising a mere 130 million out of over three billion — the bishop stressed the importance of finding common values with members of other faiths to build up just and peaceful societies that have concern for the poor.

Escalante, a graduate of the Institute of Theological Studies in Guadalajara, said evangelizing the good news of Jesus means being faithful to God and his plan of love and salvation for the church, as well as caring for one's neighbor.

Gestures of forgiveness

During the afternoon closing lit-

urgy in a packed arena at the Anaheim Convention Center, Cardinal Roger Mahony spoke in his homily on the importance of practicing forgiveness in a world dominated by the "three Rs: revenge, retribution and retaliation."

"In our own time, in our own world, and in our own church, we need a superabundance of the spirit of forgiveness and pardon," said the cardinal. "Terrorism is maximum unforgiveness."

The cardinal then related a personal experience with forgiveness when he recently met with two victims of clergy sexual abuse who accepted his apology on behalf of the church and extended "great gestures of forgiveness."

"They came and said to me, 'We forgive you, we forgive the oppressors, we forgive the church, we forgive all the misery that has been ours,'" said Cardinal Mahony. "When they were finished with this extraordinary gift of forgiveness, they were the most peace-filled people I've met in a long time because their lives were unburdened."

The cardinal encouraged the congregation to approach the season of Lent with a repentant heart, asking the question, "To whom do I need to extend unconditional and full forgiveness as we begin the Lenten journey?"

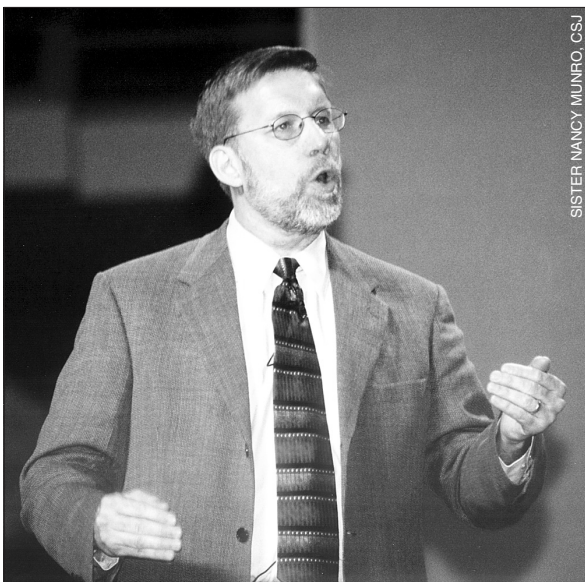
During the weekend Congress participants reflected on the challenges they face as Catholics today and the ways they hold on to their faith.

"In all aspects, personally and professionally, you are approached by people more boldly than ever before challenging your position in light of the recent history of the church," said Michael Pursell, part of the RCIA ministry at St. Columban Church in Garden Grove. "You have to be close to Jesus and his saving word and be able to transmit it with generosity, without hostility or anger. I think the best lesson I learned was from Mother Teresa: Pray! And I pray and I pray."

Carol Schmitz, kindergarten teacher at St. Anne School in Santa Monica, said she knew only a small percentage of priests are involved in the sex abuse scandal. Her faith, she said, "is just as strong."

Added Marcie Sallcowski of Our Lady of the Snows Church in Reno: "Our prayers are with the victims and we grieve as they grieve."

Yong Wan of St. Thomas Church in Anaheim said his focus was on God and faith education. "I'm here to encounter with God. There are a lot of useful tools in the form of literature, ideas and inspiration to take back to my parish," said Wan. "You can't let the scandals and bad press influence you so much that it pushes you away from the world and from God." ♦



KEYNOTE — A spirit of hospitality means "making room for people whose viewpoints are different from your own," said theologian Richard Gaillardetz in his keynote talk Feb. 21.

OPENING — "It is the trials that bring us closer to God," said Sister Edith Prendergast in her Congress-opening address Feb. 20.

