

RE Congress: 40,000-plus voices resounding in Anaheim

BY TIDINGS STAFF

Faithful from 41 countries and 47 U.S. states gathered in Anaheim or watched the live webcast of the annual Los Angeles Religious Education Congress last weekend, calling believers around the world to attend to the life-infusing Voice of God.

More than 40,000 people came to the Anaheim Convention Center for the 2012 Congress centered on the theme, "Voice Infusing Life," which started with a day-long event of high-energy rallies, workshops and liturgies for 15,000 high school youth from several western states March 22. The Congress live webcast drew viewers from 873 cities spanning the globe.

Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez and archdiocesan director of religious education, Religious Sister of Charity Edith Prendergast, led a Friday morning opening rite and welcome streamed live online and simulcasted to Convention Hall B from the arena packed to the third tier balcony with attendees, many proudly wearing apparel with their parish affiliation.

Commenting in her opening reflection on this year's theme, Sister Prendergast said that the Voice of God, which set the universe in motion, resounds through the ages. "So many places in Scripture we hear God pleading for us to hear his voice," she noted.

"The voice of God is easy to recognize, but difficult to take to heart," said Sister Prendergast. "It is a voice that calls us away from old habits, inviting us to adopt more wholesome ones." To hear God's voice, she continued, people need to be reflective and discerning.

"We have to recognize the voice of the shepherd — and the voice of the stranger," added Sister Prendergast. "At the heart of religious education is always a personal encounter with Jesus Christ."

'Our job is to listen'

In keeping with the Congress theme, Saturday morning's keynote speaker spoke first about listening to God's voice in his address: "The Urgency of Discipleship and Evangelization in Today's World."

"Voice is a characteristic of human beings and, therefore, it is a characteristic of the God



DORIS BENAVIDES

CELEBRATION — A packed Anaheim Convention Center Arena celebrates the Religious Education Congress' opening rite March 23.

who made human beings," pointed out Father Anthony Gittins, a member of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. "Some people, tragically, lack a voice. Some people are deprived of a voice and, therefore, some people become powerless.

"But our God is a God who speaks with power and with creativity. And God's voice infuses life. God's voice is the very foundation of the Jewish and Christian religions. God speaks and things happen. God says, 'Let it be,' and it takes place. The human voice and God's voice are the foundation of discipleship. And we ourselves badly need to be quiet, badly need to listen in order to hear God's voice."

The former missionary and formation director, and current professor of theology and culture at the Catholic Theological Union of Chicago, said modern-day disciples are people who not only hear the word of God in

today's 24/7 hectic world but then internalize it and, finally, put it into practice. This inner knowledge and outward action comes not so much from learning facts about Jesus, but following Jesus' life of serving others as he did in his day-to-day ministry.

"We cannot be disciples simply by knowing about Jesus or reading about Jesus or even hearing about Jesus unless he has an impact on our daily life, unless we are constantly and consistently internalizing the word of Jesus," said Father Gittins, a native of England. "And we cannot simply come to Jesus and be with Jesus. This discipleship is not just 'me and Jesus.' Authentic discipleship is 'me and Jesus for you' and for the world."

Concerning evangelization, the member of the Spiritan community wondered aloud how it became a "rational" church-driven program. He said evangelization, in essence, is simply continuing the way Jesus brought his

father's loving mission down to earth.

"The church is the servant, the instrument of evangelization," Father Gittins said. "But the church, like all of us, occasionally forgets and thinks that the church is in charge as we sometimes forget and think that we are in charge. We cannot be in charge of God's mission. Our job is to listen to the Holy Spirit.

"So evangelization is not a program as such, because Jesus doesn't have a program. Jesus' life is a discovery process. This is true evangelization, and this is what we must do as disciples who are called to do what Jesus does."

'Be Jesus' voice'

In his homily at the concelebrated closing liturgy in the arena March 25, Archbishop José Gomez urged the large assembly to

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SR. NANCY MUNRO, CSJ

PLEASED — Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez and Sister Edith Prendergast lead a March 23 opening rite at the Religious Education Congress.



R. W. DELLINGER

SAFE INITIATIVE — Bishop Richard Garcia of Monterey addresses a March 24 noon prayer service and rally at Congress for the 2012 general election SAFE initiative to replace California's death penalty with life in prison without the possibility of parole.



DORIS BENAVIDES

ONLINE CHAT — Archbishop José Gomez and his priest-secretary, Fr. Brian Castaneda, enjoy their March 23 online discussion with students from St. Dorothy School, Glendora.