

'The message of the Gospel keeps me focused'

Congress participants discuss the challenges of being a Catholic and keeping the faith in a difficult time.

By Sister Nancy Munro and Michelle Gahee

The mood was decidedly upbeat at the recent Religious Education Congress in Anaheim, yet participants knew full well that they would be returning to a daily life in which challenges abound — within their own ministry, within their church and within their society.

During this period, The Tidings asked a number of Congress participants, "What are the challenges of being a Catholic at this time? And how do you hold on to your faith?" Some of the responses follow.

June Hudson, 5th grade teacher, St. John Chrysostom School, Inglewood:

"During these challenging times I manage to stay strong and have my faith in God. I think the Catholic Church has always gone through challenges. My faith is strong because I believe in what Christ has said he will do for me and I trust in him. He has not and will not break any of his promises. And I think we, as a church, will stay focused.

"I've had people ask me, 'How can you stay in the Catholic Church with all the accusations going on with priests?' I tell them: 'Jesus is

the head of our church. I go to church, look into the Gospels and listen to what the priest has to say to me — the message of the Gospel. It keeps me focused.' My faith is strong.

"God has always taken care of me. I truly believe that when I talk to him, he hears me, and he never breaks his promises. And that's the truth. No one is perfect. Only Jesus is perfect. The priests, nuns, deacons, bishops and us make up the church. People are not perfect, but we strive and try to be like Jesus as much as we can."

Laura Schmitz, first grade teacher, St. Joan of Arc School, Los Angeles; parishioner at Visitation Church, Westchester:

"The controversies haven't affected me in any way. I am lucky; both of my parishes are strong. And since I am teaching first grade, it doesn't affect my students. It gets a little disheartening because I grew up here and went to Catholic schools all my life. Now I am teaching in one. I try to rise above it and I think it will get better. It's just one thing in all that's going on in life."

Teri Sanchez, music minister, St. Maria Goretti Church, Long Beach:



KEEPING FAITH — "I try to rise above the controversies in the church," says Laura Schmitz (right), with mom Carol at the Religious Education Congress in Anaheim. Both are teachers at local Catholic schools and attend Visitation Church, Westchester.

"For some people the church isn't part of what they are — but I need to stay in it. The challenge is to try to defend it as a Catholic. You have some priests and ministers who are doing unspeakable things, and those who are not Catholic are coming to you and saying, 'How can you still be a Catholic? How can you believe this?' My response is: 'They're human.' It's about my relationship to my God and the people I minister to in the parish. It's mainly

a challenge of a church that is not changing in a very changing world."

"Has it shaken my faith any? No. I am a cradle Catholic. And my ministry keeps me grounded. Working with young men, the novices of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit who live in the parish and are studying for the priesthood, makes you in awe of the commitment they are making, seeing the spirit in their eyes, seeing the light. As a cantor, a music minister, when people really 'get it' from the psalmody, from the liturgy — that keeps you grounded. It keeps me grounded. And prayer — it anchors me.

Abdon Santiago, second year confirmation teacher, St. Augustine Church, South San Francisco:

"The challenge, with all the controversy going on, is just to be able to keep up with your own self — being faithful to God and self. It is tough. My friends ask why am I not around, and it's because I am doing stuff for the church and trying to spread my faith out there and trying to help younger people build up their own faith.

"How do you hold on to your faith? It's not that hard because working with kids and just seeing them see the light of God helps out

a lot. I love working with kids; just seeing them see what I see is a gift in itself. God loves all regardless of whoever you are, whatever you do and he'll always be there."

Sylvia Sarver, St. Francis de Sales Church, Las Vegas (and wife of a deacon):

"I find it a challenge in my parish for everyone to respect one another when you are working as a team with different views.... It's challenging to be able to hear what a traditional Catholic is objecting to and explaining the what for and why so, so that person can join you.

"What helps me hold onto my faith is the Bible study group and the prayer group that emerged from my choir. We enrich each other. I also listen to Congress cassettes throughout the year. It helps me with my spiritual life.

Lesieli Sekona, Holy Spirit Church, San Diego: "Attending the conference has given us a better understanding of faith and made us stronger and deepened our faith. In the face of the difficulties the church is facing different people and religions may try to weaken your beliefs and hurt you but what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." ♦

Evangelization in a pluralistic, privatized world

Congress speaker discusses challenges of witnessing Catholicism in age of religious pluralism.

By Paula Doyle
STAFF WRITER

Evanglizing can be a prickly proposition in today's religiously plural, increasingly skeptical world, said University of Chicago history professor R. Scott Appleby, in his Feb. 22 keynote address at the 2004 Religious Education Congress.

"The role of evangelizing in open, liberal societies or even in societies that are trying to move toward democratic principles is a pressing global question," asserted Appleby, author of "Church and Age Unite! The Modernist Impulse in American Catholicism" and co-author of "The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World."

According to Appleby, when liberal societies are not "checked" or modified by communitarian (group) values or principles, three dominant cultural trends emerge which are a major challenge to evangelization: radical skepticism, anti-foundationalism and suspicion of larger narratives such as the Bible.

"Today, skepticism is the orientation of many, if not most, Ameri-

cans," said Appleby. Because skeptics take the view that reason itself can't come to reliable conclusions about the ultimate nature of reality, they want to take the question of human destiny "off the table," he explained. People of faith, especially when dealing with the media, will encounter hostility and suspicion of any claims that come from a source of conviction or belief, Appleby declared.

Closely related to the challenge of skepticism is the trend of anti-foundationalism, which Appleby describes as a denial of the existence of universal foundations for knowledge. "The anti-foundationalists say there are no foundations for moral reasoning based on nature," said Appleby. Anti-foundationalists refute the notion that there are higher principles binding people together.

Ironically, said Appleby, the Catholic Church unintentionally contributed to the anti-foundationalist development during the '60s and '70s with the acknowledgement of diversity, which created "a flowering of pluralism — wonderful event in itself — but also destabilizing." According to Appleby, the concern was



RAPT AUDIENCE — Congress 2004 speaker, R. Scott Appleby, answers questions after his talk on the challenges of evangelization in today's society.

less on how we are bound together as one people of God than on how we are the peoples of God.

"Now that was a perfectly appropriate, in my opinion, development, and a welcome development in theology, but it occurs at the same time that, in the larger culture, there is an excess of individualism and focus on (individual) experience."

Also occurring at this time, said Appleby, was a "rapid erosion of the Bible and its story" as a mental

framework for living. "This is very troubling and challenging for Catholics who are members of a Biblical people," Appleby explained. He said it reflects a larger trend of a suspicion of "big stories" viewed as manipulative ways of controlling people.

While Appleby acknowledged that spirituality is alive in people, today, trust in religion and the value of living spiritual values in community is not as prevalent. In addition, there is a pervasive sense of being isolated

in society, especially among people under 40 who grew up in the digital age of computers and e-mail.

In today's cyber world, said Appleby, every evangelist has to be "architectonic." "Everything that is said about Christ, every kind of ritual, every kind of message has to point to the foundation, to the plumbing, to the fact that this structure has been standing for 2,000 years. It wasn't made up yesterday, it didn't just come over the Web...and people have died for it and people have given their lives to it and it is a foundation by which you look at all of life."

As far as society's religious pluralism, Appleby said evangelizers have to foster a "hard tolerance." This means participating in respectful, inter-religious dialogue while "never yielding on what we understand to be the full (Gospel) message."

"Catholic Christians don't accept that religion is privatized, therefore not relevant to the public realm," said Appleby. "We are a church that's engaged...we don't accept the idea that we're all atomized individuals." ♦