



LISTEN! — Father Tony Ricard (standing), pastor of Our Lady Star of the Sea in New Orleans, urged teens attending March 17 Youth Day to learn to listen to God.



FROM COVINA — Partial group of the 50 attending Youth Day from Covina's Sacred Heart Parish.

Youth Day: 'Jesus loves us to the end,' archbishop tells teens

BY DORIS BENAVIDES
Staff Writer

So moved was Archbishop José Gomez at his first Religious Education Congress Youth Day that he suggested his youthful audience — who afforded him a lengthy standing ovation — continue the event at their parishes every week or every month.

The 40th anniversary event March 17 — whose theme this year was "Godbook, Everyone Invited!" — drew more than 15,000, with Archbishop Gomez celebrating the Mass in the Arena attended by about 11,000. (A parallel Mass at an adjacent hall, with Father Ken Deasy presiding, was attended by some 4,000 youth and chaperones.)

The archbishop was visibly touched by the ovation that lasted more than a minute. "What a better way to 'induct' Archbishop Gomez to the Religious Education Congress than at Youth Day," declared Mike Norman, associate director of the Office of Religious Education and Youth Day coordinator for the last 16 years, during his closing remarks.

In his homily, Archbishop Gomez stressed Jesus' love for "his children" and God's plan for each human being.

"Jesus loves us to the end," he said. "In Jesus we find the meaning of our lives. In Jesus we see relived the great dignity that we have as sons and daughters of God.

"Before the world was created God knew our names; before there was a sun and the stars he had a destiny for each one of us, he had a plan for our lives."

He urged the youth to be aware of God's love for them, "especially today when you are easily distracted by the use of technology. You're always texting, listening to music, and Facebook, and all of those things that I don't really know too much about. I'm too old for that," he admitted, eliciting laughter.

Then he stressed the importance of the Eucharist as the "key for having this ongoing presence of God in our lives." He shared that

when he questions himself what is he doing in Los Angeles, he recalls his early teenage years when he decided it would be good for him to attend daily Mass to strengthen his Catholic faith.

"Since that point, when I started attending daily Mass trying to center my life in the Eucharist, everything changed," he noted. "I was the same person. Nothing changed externally, but really, at that moment everything changed in my life and that's the reason why I am here now in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles."

Citing the readings in Matthew, he challenged the teens to ask God how he can use their lives.

"Ask our Father to show you what he wants you to do with your lives and believe that he will give you every good gift that you need, all the fun that you're looking for. Seek the God others really love and believe that he will show you the face of God. Knock on the door of our Father's house in faith and believe that in his house, his church, you will find the love and happiness that we are all looking for in our lives."

He ended his homily with the story of Maria de la Luz Camacho Gonzalez, a 27-year-old Mexican woman who was killed when trying to defend her parish in the early 1900s when the Catholic Church in Mexico suffered great persecution.

"Open your eyes wide open and embrace God," Archbishop Gomez told the young assembly. "Live your lives beautifully and bring everyone to the love of Jesus. Invite everyone you need."

Prior to his message, two young Catholics — Camille Becker, from Sacred Heart in Lancaster, and Ruben Ruiz, from Nativity in El Monte — shared their stories of doubt about God, how they were led back to Him, and how they increased their involvement in church.

"But what this is really about," Becker told her peers, "is inviting others to share this journey with you. It's not just about inviting who you like, but about inviting the people who've brought you down and the

people who've brought you back up."

Becker's remarks were supported by keynote speaker Justin Fatica, who several times during his speech asked his audience to tell themselves and their neighbors how amazing they are, and challenged them to promote change in themselves and others.

Inviting a group of Junipero Serra High School students on the stage to share their own experience with drugs, molestation and living with single parents, Fatica reminded the young audience that they are not alone in their struggles.

After several workshops held mid-morning and mid-afternoon, the event closed with a rally preceded by Father Tony Ricard, pastor of Our Lady Star of the Sea in New Orleans (at the Arena), and Christian rap singer Joe Melendrez, pastoral associate and religion teacher at Chaminade College Preparatory High School (in adjacent Hall B).

During his talk entitled "Shut Up and Just Listen: Jesus Has Something to Say!" Father Ricard urged the teenagers to take a "still" time to listen to God.

"Staying still doing nothing accomplishes nothing," he noted, "but if you're still with God, good things start happening."

Melendrez invited the youth to express themselves and reflect to the rhythm of hip-hop prayer, which he performed.

The adolescents and their chaperones appreciated what they heard, especially from Archbishop Gomez.

"I really liked the example of that young woman who died for her church —

very inspiring," said Annalise Lowry, from Sacred Heart in Covina.

"It's good to look up to women like this woman who gave her life for God and sometimes we can't even give an hour to make ourselves better," said the 15-year-old sophomore of South Hills High School in West Covina, while standing next to her proud mother Andrea. They were part of a group of 50 youth and chaperones from Sacred Heart.

Lowry's comment fulfilled one of the main goals of the day, according to Norman: "to start this special connection between Archbishop Gomez and young people."

This year's organizing committee, mostly comprised of youth ministry members, focused on getting youth involved on-stage and back-stage. All the events at the Arena were streamed online and after the Mass, Archbishop Gomez spent about an hour chatting online with L.A.'s St. Thomas the Apostle School students, following a tradition established by Cardinal Roger Mahony.

St. Patrick's Day was also celebrated, with violinist Connor Vance, from Our Lady of Malibu, opening Youth Day with spirited Irish music. ❖



INVITED — Teenagers danced to the rhythm of Latin pop/reggae theme song "Everyone's Invited/Son todos invitados," by Pedro Rubalcava.