

'Embrace trust'

How encountering Christ is key to religious education

BY J.D. LONG-GARCÍA / ANGELUS

Religious education is about an encounter with Christ.

When asked specifically about young Catholics, Father Chris Bazyouros, who has been serving as the director of the Office of Religious Education for the Los Angeles Archdiocese for the last two years, says his approach often applies to all Catholics, young and old alike.

"People are going to come to us because they perceive that we have something that they really need," he says. "All of us are going to say, 'Of course, you need God!' But the rest of the world doesn't think that way."

So, Father Bazyouros says, the key is how catechists and other Catholics help others encounter Christ as a living person.

"And in so doing, give people a chance to think, to consider that this person — Jesus — also wants to be a part of their lives and can be relevant in their lives," he says.

Young adults are around, but are not being connected, he says. A young night is great, but it's just the beginning. Young adults want to be involved in service organizations and want to engage through their preferred methods of communication.

"There's a whole sense that we are being called to get out of what's comfortable for us and to seek out those people," Father Bazyouros says. "We are being called to be the apostles of today. The apostles didn't set up shop and wait for people to come by. They went where the people were. They saw what they were doing. They listened to their conversations and they said, 'I hear what you are saying, let

me talk to you about this.' They went where people gathered and brought this message of Christ."

Still, he says, it wasn't so much that the apostles knew what to say, but that they carried a "living faith." "And people were drawn to that living faith and said there's something happening here. I have to find out what it is," Father Bazyouros explains.

"It's really going to be the same with everyone. With youth and children, we need to also look into walking with their parents, but also walking with adults who are not married, or who are single who are trying to make their way into adulthood," he says, adding that they are "trying to find something that is meaningful. These sorts of things don't happen overnight. We gently offer an opportunity to be a part of something greater."

Offering that opportunity includes answering Pope Francis' call to be present to the marginalized.

"So going to the margins, going out to people who are hurting and suffering, that was always Jesus' mission," he says. "If we ever find ourselves asking 'What should we do?' Well, look at the mission of Jesus. The call to the margins is not new, but there's a renewed sense of urgency about doing it."

Pope Francis has been concerned that the Church is too inward looking and too comfortable, Father Bazyouros says. It's not a matter of waiting for people who are in need to show up asking for help.

"This call to the margin, we have to be careful that we don't dismiss it as being based on some political agenda, and we have to be careful not to forget

that it's based on the witness and teaching and life of Jesus and what he laid down for his disciples," he says. "It is what he wanted them to do."

Father Bazyouros, who in 2013 began working in the Office of Religious Education at the behest of former director Sister Edith Prendergast, RSC, says the office is seeing "a lot of amazing things" in its work.

"I feel that we're really at a key moment in our history as a Church, a time to make some important decisions about how we want to move forward into this new century," Father Bazyouros says. "If we're able to allow the Spirit to guide us in those decisions, we'll see amazing things happening. The work of evangelization, not just from Pope Francis but also from his predecessors, is continually coming up in our conversations. How do we encounter Christ?"

The only way to embrace trust, he says, is to encounter Christ.

"Embracing Trust," this year's Religious Education Congress theme, came about as all Congress themes do — when the ORE team prayed about the Sunday readings from Congress weekend. In the Gospel reading from Matthew, "Jesus says the birds of the air don't worry about what they are going to eat or wear, why should you?" Father Bazyouros says. "The whole sense of really completely putting all of your life into God's hands, which is always difficult for us, especially in difficult situations."

It's difficult to embrace trust for many who are uncertain about the future of the United States or who see the continuing war in Syria.



Archbishop José H. Gomez, Sister Helen Prejan, CSJ, and Father Chris Bazzyouros sit together before Sister Helen gave last year's keynote address Feb. 27 at the Religious Education Congress.

"We want to have some sense of control, or at least assurance that things are going to work out the way we hope they do," he says. "But to fully trust that if we completely put ourselves in God's hands, that how God wants things to come about will ultimately be best for everyone — that's tough."

Father Bazzyouros keeps a saying from St. Theodora Guérin, who founded the Sisters of the Providence of Mary-of-the-Woods, close to his heart. "Have confidence in the providence of God that so far has never failed us."

In the theme "Embracing Trust," Father Bazzyouros says he wasn't intentionally trying to promote a particular idea, "But I really don't believe in coincidences anymore." Trusting in God's providence is part of what the faith is all about.

"That complete abandon that we see in the life of Jesus, the abandonment

to God's providence that we see in our Blessed Mother Mary, and then ultimately all the saints and all those wonderful witnesses of faith, they've all taught us about this complete abandonment in God's hands."

Father Bazzyouros shared a couple of simple prayer tips he learned in the seminary that can be useful for others: "Pray as you can, not as you can't," and "Make time every day to pray."

"If you want to engage in a prayer life, the idea is that you engage in a prayer that connects to you on a deep level," he explains. "So if you enjoy reading Scripture, read Scripture. I mean, everyone should read it, but some enter into it more easily as a prayer practice. If you find great depth in the rosary, pray that. If you're a morning person, then get up early and pray. If you're a night owl, like me, your time is at night or some other time. Don't pray when you're really not there."

In ensuring daily prayers, Father Bazzyouros shares advice he'd received to put down prayer like an appointment.

"Put it on your calendar that this is your time for prayer, because if you look for it you'll never have it. But if you make time for it, you'll always have it there," he says. "I look at it like you have a standing time to call your mom — like every Wednesday night you call your mom. You make time for prayer because it's important for your relationship with God."

Prayer is an encounter and helps us carry the living God to others.

"Look back at the life of Jesus and meditate on part of his life," Father Bazzyouros says. "Read a passage from Scripture and see how he dealt with people. Listen to the way he treated them. Ask yourself if you were to meet someone, could you meet someone in the way Christ did? Can I meet someone and treat them like he did? And be with them like he did?" ♦