

Youth Day at 2017 Religious Education Congress

BY ALLYSON ESCOBAR / ANGELUS

Cathy Alba, a senior at St. Lucy's Priory High School in Glendora, attended her first Los Angeles Youth Day with her youth group from St. Paul the Apostle Church in Chino Hills.

"I decided to go since it's my last year in high school, and I wanted to see what it was all about," Alba shared. "Everyone has been telling me it's a great experience, so I'm excited."

Nearly 12,800 teens from across the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, neighboring dioceses and beyond kicked off the 2017 Religious Education Congress with Youth Day, held all day on Feb. 23.

Since the first Youth Rally in 1971 with then-Archbishop Cardinal Timothy Manning, thousands of Catholic and public high school students have packed the Anaheim Convention Center annually for an energizing day of fellowship, worship, engaging speakers and activities before the annual conference begins the following day.

Themed "What Are You Waiting For?" this year's Youth Day challenged teens to wake up and act now, and not delay in living out the Gospel in everyday life.

The day kicked off with an opening praise and worship rally, featuring lively music from Father Rob Galea and the Emmaus Blvd. band. Thousands of teens were off their seats, dancing to worship and contemporary music in the packed arena.

"Let's face it, having faith was a lot easier when we were little kids — we just trusted in mom and dad," shared keynote speaker Bob Perron, a youth minister from West Virginia.

"But having a childlike faith is one that is trusting, innocent, loving and joyful. If we have this faith, we can live out our theme of "What Are We Waiting For?"

Parishes and schools were separated into two track schedules, with

teens attending general sessions and workshops throughout the convention center.

At Katie Prejean McGrady's workshop, "Created and Called to Love," youths were invited to see themselves as beloved, created and called.

"We get to participate and partake in the creative action of the creator of the world," McGrady said. "God creates beautiful things, creates us, out of love ... not just for nothing. Every time God creates, he says it is good."

Rapper Joe Melendrez encouraged a room full of energized teens to live out their Catholic faith with a joyful boldness, LifeTeen ministry's Mark Hart talked about sacred Scripture and singer Danielle Rose shared her vocation story and original songs about the lives of the saints.

Upstairs, the "Sacred Space" provided a quiet place of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, a meditative labyrinth and a multimedia ecological art exhibit about caring for Mother Earth, based on Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment, "Laudato Si."

The event would not have been possible without its core team of coordinators from the Office of Religious Education of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles — including Father Chris Bazouros, director; Victoria Radleigh, coordinator of Youth Ministry; Katie Zeigler and Heather MacDonald, from the Youth Ministry Division — planning the day months in advance.

Hundreds of adult and teen volunteers also helped the event run smoothly in various components — including liturgical, music, dance, backstage and technology.

With the help of social media, technology was ever-present throughout the day.

"Anaheim Youth Day" was trending on Snapchat, while interactive geo-filters encouraged young Catholics to "get lit for the Lord."

The interactive RE Congress app

E-VINE also allowed participants to personalize their Youth Day track schedule, learn more about the conference speakers and engage with other teens from across the region.

After a hearty lunch with their respective dioceses, thousands of teens gathered for more talks, music from the Youth Day choir and orchestra, and final liturgy, celebrated by Archbishop José H. Gomez.

Mass collection beneficiaries went to House of Ruth, an organization dedicated to assisting families and victims of domestic violence, raising awareness and providing prevention education programs.

"Your generosity helps make it possible for youth in our local archdiocese to become missionary disciples and makes a big difference in the lives of fellow young people," shared coordinator Victoria Radleigh.

Liturgical readings for the Book of Sirach and the Gospel of Mark called participants to action, turning to Christ and not to delay the decision to be a faithful Christian — because the time is now.

"I feel like it is important for teens to go to events like [Youth Day], because as we get older these opportunities aren't as available to us," said Alba. "As youth, we should engage and be active in our faith. ... I think the theme of 'What Are You Waiting For?' means, like, what does the future have in store, what is God's plan for me? It's so important, especially in the transition from high school to college."

In his homily, Archbishop Gomez shared his story of discernment, reminded the youths to be prayerful and told them about the liturgical feast of St. Polycarp, a saint of the second century.

"You are all saints of the 21st century," said Archbishop Gomez. "The world needs you, the church needs you. ... If God made us to be saints, then what are we waiting for?" ♦

