

Religious Ed Congress: 'A great moment for conversion'

The Anaheim Convention Center Arena is full for the Religious Education Congress' closing Mass March 20.



been made available in a way that was never been known before. "The transforming reality of the cross is about the forgiving reality of God," said Gordon.

"As catechists, we're called to be the transformers of the world. We're called to be those individuals who go out into our communities: in our classrooms, in our marketplace, in our parishes sharing our understanding and our deep knowledge of God's grace.

Suffering will not be something without meaning "if we attach it to Christ," said Gordon. "Because of Jesus Christ, because of the transformation of that cross, we will be changed, and we will know God and we will know Jesus as he truly is."

The goal: Conversion

Opening his homily at the closing Mass with prayers for "our brothers and sisters in Japan who are suffering," Archbishop José Gomez recounted the story of Satoko Kitahara, who lived in Tokyo during the aftermath of WWII. After converting to Catholicism at 20, she started to see the world differently and left her wealthy parents' home to live with the poor until her death from tuberculosis at age 29.

"The story of Satoko Kitahara is the story of every disciple," said Archbishop Gomez. "We are called to follow God's call and to teach others about him; to bear witness to his love in our lives.

"God wants all men and women to know what we know — that he is alive, that he loves us with a Father's great love. That means that we all are called to be missionaries, to be apostles. This is your task as religious educators. You are evangelists, missionaries.

The goal of religious education is not to impart information, continued the archbishop. "It is to bring men and women to knowledge and faith in God's redemptive plan," he said. "It is to bring men and women to conversion — to know Jesus and to know the love and forgiveness of our Father."

He said that God's words in the day's Transfiguration Gospel, "This is my beloved

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Keynote speaker Jack Jezreel talks with one of the thousands who attended the Religious Education Congress in Anaheim.

BY TIDINGS STAFF

An enthusiastic assembly — a host of assemblies, actually — greeted new Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez as he experienced his first Religious Education Congress in Anaheim last weekend, and with it the spirit and thirst for knowledge, support and sharing that accompanies the largest event of its kind worldwide.

More than 40,000 people, including more than 15,000 at Youth Day, attended the March 18-20 Congress at the Anaheim Convention Center, representing nearly every U.S. state and nearly every continent in the world. A good number of those present took the opportunity to greet Archbishop Gomez, less than a month into his new post, and he smilingly accommodated every request for a handshake, a photo and a word of welcome.

The March 18 Gathering Event in the Arena began with traditionally high-spirited music, dance and hand-clapping that escalated when Religious Sister of Charity Edith Prendergast, director of the Office of Religious Education that sponsors Congress, formally welcomed Archbishop Gomez. Thousands stood, applauded and cheered as Sister Prendergast then presented the archbishop with a copy of the St. John's Bible (Gospels and Acts).

"This is a great moment for conversion," Archbishop Gomez told the assembly at the close of the event, "a conversion of heart in this Lenten season. For once we have conversion, we can bring the Good News to the people of God.

Sister Prendergast's talk on the Congress theme, "Hold Firm ... Trust!", likewise addressed evangelization. "As teachers and leaders," she said, "we know the Church exists to evangelize. We are challenged to lead our people to a new vision, calling them to have faith and to trust."

She urged the parish and school ministers in the arena not to be discouraged in difficult or challenging times.

"As Catholics, we believe all will be well, if God is at the center of our lives," she de-

clared. "Believing we are loved and cherished by God, we can risk, because we know as Christians that we will rise even in the midst of pain. And we can't do it alone; we must collaborate. And isn't that what we're about? Working together to share the Good News as catechetical leaders?"

The mission: Renewal

During his March 19 morning keynote speech entitled "Gathered and Sent: Saints, Prophets, Martyrs on a Mission," Jack Jezreel stressed the need of practicing compassion and integrity in parishes, as outlined in the Catholic social teachings, which he said are "still a best-kept secret in the Church."

With Archbishop José Gomez sitting behind him on stage, Jezreel alerted the packed Arena that his presentation had the intention to "provoke vs. anesthetize" and to "agitate" in order to give way to "new and fresh thoughts."

"Those of us inspired by saints, martyrs and prophets who work in social ministry often say that our work is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable," said the founder and executive director of Kentucky-based JustFaith Ministries, which he described as a "faith formation laboratory."

"I consider being made uncomfortable an attribute of the Holy Spirit," he continued. "And I believe that the transformation process begins with being provoked, disturbed or annoyed, which is why people who have children are so often transformed," he noted, eliciting laughter.

Describing the content of his speech as "quintessentially Catholic," he warned that his proposals would also speak to the reconfiguration of Catholic parishes.

"If it can be said that Catholic social teaching is still a best-kept secret in the church; that most people in most parishes are only vaguely familiar with the tradition of compassion for the poor and the vulnerable, with charity and justice written, spoken or lived, it can be also said that every facet of Catholic life in most parishes is being shortchanged," Jezreel said.

Pointing out that although social ministries in parishes are growing and sometimes thriving in a few places, they are still under-

developed and are challenged by the church structure.

"Bishops are handicapped by the structure, which can be changed," he remarked.

Citing Matthew 25, Jezreel noted that parishes have lost their mission, becoming "static" places of gathering instead of places of spiritual formation that lead to compassion and justice with an eye towards mission, which "usually happens outside the church."

He suggested using half the parish's budget, staff, building and energy for gathering and the other half for sending missionaries to the field, and he offered the JustFaith offices "free of charge" to pastors who want to work on developing social ministries in their parishes.

The cross: Sign of hope

Speaking on "The Cross as Transformation" in her Sunday morning keynote address, Dr. Greer Gordon opened with a meditation on Jesus, who experienced human joys, misunderstandings, and humiliation.

"The pain was great and the grief was lasting — that is the cross that we will talk about," said Gordon. "As we reflect on Christ in our lives, I think we have to begin by recognizing the fact that the cross is an enigma; it is a sign of profound distress, and yet for those of us who are Christians, it is a sign of great hope."

Gordon pointed out that Jesus knew rejection and abandonment. "The experience of Jesus is the experience of many people who find themselves wondering what they have done, what has happened to them and why it is that they suffer so much."

She noted the suffering of the Japanese coping with the destruction from the recent earthquake and tsunami. "As a community of believers, we have to find ourselves united with that nation, with those people as we talk about suffering in our time and the meaning of the cross," said Gordon.

The cross, according to Gordon, is a sign of hope, "because of the fact that we know that God, in and through that cross, in and through the death of his son whom he raised from the dead" brought salvation into the world. Forgiveness, she added, has

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