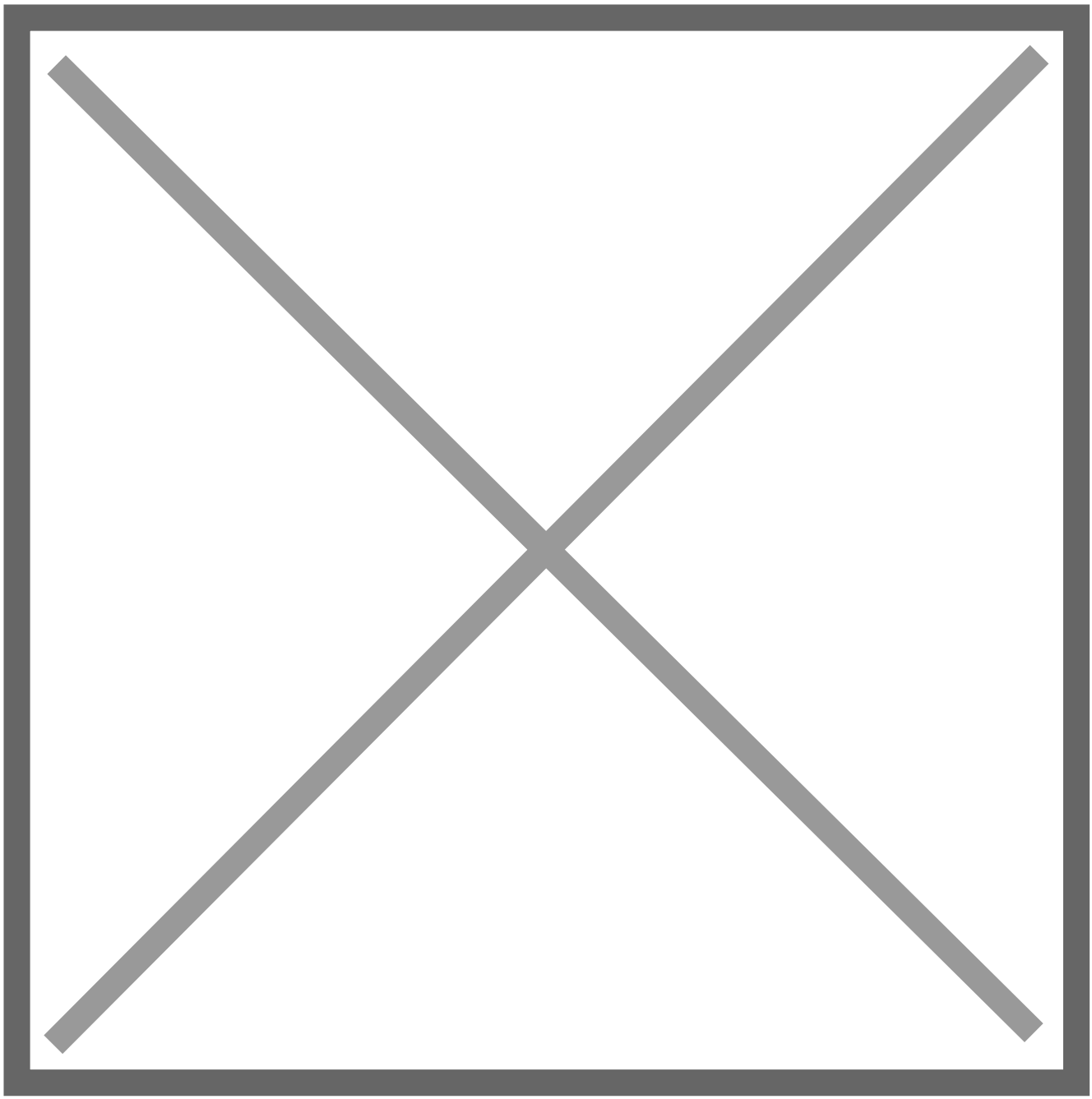
Spirituality



Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, delivers his closing homily Feb. 21, 2021, for the annual Los Angeles archdiocesan Religious Education Congress, which was held virtually because of the pandemic. (CNS screen grab/Religious Education Congress via YouTube)

Tom Hoffarth

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For Jesus' parents, "answering God's call meant their whole lives were turned upside down," not unlike the events of the past year, Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez said Feb. 21 at the close of the all-virtual 2021 Religious Education Congress.

Reminding participants of the Year of St. Joseph recently declared by Pope Francis, he made the case that "Mary and Joseph give us a beautiful example for our ministries in this moment."

"They trusted in God's promise of love, they trusted in his plan for their lives," Gomez said in his homily during a morning Mass that closed the congress.

Celebrated in a largely empty Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, the liturgy was transmitted online to participants, as were all sessions of the Feb. 18-21 congress this year.

Mary and Joseph "accepted the hard realities in their lives with the obedience of faith," the archbishop said. "They trusted that in all things, he works for the good of those who love him."

He also asked viewers to consider signs of hope, like the popularity of Fr. Mike Schmitz's "The Bible in a Year," near the top of the Apple charts since early January.

"Why do you think that this is popular?" he asked.

"In my opinion, it is because people are hungry for the truth," said Gomez. "With all the disruption, all the unrest and uncertainty in the world and in our lives, people are looking for a true story, they're looking for answers. They want to know God's purposes, they want to know if there is a 'plan' and how they 'fit in.'"

From Pope Francis' opening message urging "commitment, strength and dedication" in building a post-pandemic "tomorrow," to Gomez's closing homily reminding all of "our duty in this moment to proclaim the truth of the divine," the all-virtual congress sought to stake out a unique place in the 65-year history of the event.

Its theme of "Proclaim the Promise!" was a "radical invitation" to believe our lives and our world are sustained by God's promise, said Sister Rosalia Meza, who is senior director of the Office of Religious Education. As a religious, she is a member of the Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity.

"And now more than ever, we need hope and a vision for our future," she told Angelus News, the archdiocesan online news outlet.

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The event's most prominent voices seemed intent on offering participants reasons for that hope, even if they had to do so through screens. The COVID-19 pandemic, which sent much of the world into lockdown just a few weeks after last February's congress hosted tens of thousands at the Anaheim Convention Center, left organizers no choice but to resort to a fully virtual event this year.

Still, by all accounts this year's congress was a success, given the circumstances: Over 10,000 participants from at least 21 countries registered for the event, according to organizers.

Earlier during the congress, Bishop Robert W. McElroy of San Diego addressed "What Is Truth?" in his keynote talk.

He asserted that "in this particular year of 2021, with all that we have gone through with the pandemic and all the suffering around us, I think we can focus on that part of the proclamation of the authentic Christian message: Hope rooted in truth."

He expanded on three truths he thought were most relevant: Our radical dependence on God; the kerygma, or the proclamation of Christ; and a Christian hope and faith that is communitarian, not individually realized.

"Pope Francis told us during the pandemic that one of the great lessons that emerged for us is we have looked at all those elements that are illusory in seeming to bring a sense of security in our lives, and we have come to understand those elements are false," said McElroy.

"They cannot make us secure. Whether it's wealth, our careers, or family relationships — this pandemic has shaken up everything and caused us to understand we as men and women are radically dependent," he added.

In her keynote presentation, Sister Carol Zinn, a Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, asked directly: What is hope in the promise and hope for the world?

"I don't know about you, but we're living in a time in our own country that might be a little challenging to see hope in the promise and maybe for our country," she said. "But the promise really is the question we ask ourselves: Do we believe God is good all the time, and all the time God is good?"

She then showed photographs of exotic caterpillars that turned into beautiful butterflies.

"As we know from fourth grade science, those caterpillars are built to become something else. ... Metamorphosis is way more than change. It needs stillness, solitude, and silence. Those are skills we use to have hope for the promise."

"If I choose love, mercy, and inclusion over fear, judgment, and exclusion, regardless of the cost, I will in fact open myself to transformation."

Instead of the dozens of workshops, liturgies, keynote speakers and author book signings in the crowded exhibitor hall, this year's menu was reduced to some 30 workshop speakers in English, nearly 20 in Spanish and four in Vietnamese, on demand at the official congress website, https://recongress.org. They will remain available to registered participants through March 21.

Presentations were more intimate as speakers delivered talks from their home offices, bedrooms, or living rooms, and the topics focused on many critical issues in today's world of COVID-19 recovery, post-pandemic formation, best practices in

using technology for evangelization, and even social media conduct.

Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert E. Barron started his presentation titled "Social Media and the Catholic Culture of Contempt" by confessing: "I'm missing the energy and fun of the L.A. congress. To me, it's always a highlight of the year especially to speak in the great arena. But please God, this will be over in a few months and we'll be OK."

According to Paulette Smith, associate director of the Office of Religious Education and the event's lead organizer, the all-virtual event attracted first-time participants who until now couldn't attend because they hadn't been able to travel to past congresses.