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Pope Francis in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican March 16 (CNS/Stefano Dal Pozzolo, pool)

by Catholic News Service

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Pope Francis sent greetings to participants in the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, encouraging them to continue to take God's hope to the entire world.

The March 17-20 congress is the largest of its kind in the world, and this year, again, some participated virtually, either because of distance or concerns about COVID-19. Francis acknowledged those who gathered in person as well as those who participated virtually.

"In these days, we are aware that the pandemic continues to invite us to watch over each other," Francis said in his message, released March 18. "The coronavirus continues to cause social separation and, sadly, the loss of life for many people, and this generates a social crisis. Our hope — we are believers — is placed in the Lord! In this time of fear and uncertainty, Our Lord continues to invite us to go ahead and proclaim our faith in his mercy, in his tenderness and in his tremendous love."

He said the theme of this year's Congress, "Living waters of hope," "invites us to constantly renew ourselves in the water and blood that flow from the heart of Jesus, as wellsprings of mercy for the entire world. Without this living water, our mission may be transformed into an internal and painful religiosity.

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"If you are a Christian, you are church; the church is outgoing, not inward-looking, and you must reach the existential peripheries with courage and creativity," he said.

He also noted that the Los Angeles Archdiocese was celebrating the 250th anniversary of Mission San Gabriel, founded by St. Junípero Serra.

"During his canonization in 2015, I indicated that 'he was the embodiment of a church which goes forth, a church which sets out to bring everywhere the reconciling tenderness of God,' " Francis said.

"May this jubilee be a great opportunity for renewal! And my prayer for you, as this Congress unfolds, is that Our Lord may fill your hearts with the living waters of his Spirit and renew your zeal as missionary disciples who always 'go ahead' in faith, to take his hope to the entire world, not with fine words, but with genuine acts of accompaniment, sharing with everyone the joy of knowing that we are not alone. May God, made man in Jesus, come with us through the day of life, urging us to

dream and to walk together toward the Father, transforming history and transforming ourselves."