News

A bald man in a black cassock and a pectoral cross gestures energetically on a dark stage

New York Auxiliary Bishop Joseph A. Espaillat gives a keynote address titled "Life in the Holy Spirit #GOALS" Feb. 25, 2023, during the LA Religious Education Congress in Anaheim, Calif. (OSV News photo/Victor Alemán, Angelus News)

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The dark clouds of a weather system of historic proportions added to the heaviness already felt by the thousands at the 2023 LA Religious Education Congress Feb. 23-26 in Anaheim, a week after the death of beloved Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop David G. O'Connell.

But as the morning sun came out Feb. 26, organizers had pulled together a Sunday bilingual prayer service in O'Connell's honor, with Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez presiding. His life was celebrated in many ways with Irish prayers and music, images of O'Connell from throughout the years, and testimonies from some of those who knew him best.

Fr. Jarlath "Jay" Cunnane of St. Cornelius Church in Long Beach was O'Connell's best friend, a relationship forged during their seminary days in Ireland 50 years ago.

Cunnane, from County Sligo, recalled how O'Connell, a County Cork native, used to say: "A Cork man will always leave without saying goodbye, but a Sligo man will say goodbye but he would never leave."

"Dave, you went and left without saying goodbye," said Cunnane.

Gomez assured the crowd that O'Connell is ready to intercede for them from his new home.

"Now he has more power because he's in heaven, and I'm sure you're going to feel his presence more," said the archbishop.

O'Connell figured prominently in events all weekend at Congress. Workshop speakers referenced him frequently, while a book of remembrance was set up for him in the Congress' Sacred Space, to be presented to his family at his March 3 funeral Mass at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. He had been scheduled to participate in the "Front Row with Archbishop" Congress event Feb 25 as a featured guest in a conversation about Catholic social teaching. The event was later canceled.

Even freeway-adjacent digital billboards flashed memorial messages with his photo that attendees noticed on their way into Anaheim. Angelus, the LA archdiocesan news outlet, has since learned that the signage, which appeared on 30 billboards throughout Southern California, was a gift from State Sen. Bob Archuleta, who considered O'Connell a friend.

The 69-year-old bishop was found dead of a gunshot wound to his upper torso in his home in the Los Angeles suburb of Hacienda Heights on the afternoon of Feb. 18. Police apprehended the suspected shooter, Carlos Medina, 61, after a six-hour standoff with law enforcement Feb. 20. Medina has since been charged with murder.

This year marked the first fully in-person congress since 2020 due to the pandemic. The theme was "Embrace Grace."

The morning of Feb. 25 saw a thunderclap moment that wasn't weather-related when Auxiliary Bishop Joseph A. Espaillat of New York, the first Dominican-American prelate, took the arena stage as keynote speaker to deliver on his opening promise: "My intention is to light a fire -- a fire in us."

"When I say 'Jesus,' you say 'lives'!" Espaillat urged the thousands in the arena at about 8:30 a.m., seizing the stage following a quieter and more contemplative half-hour prelude of musical and cultural reflection.

"There ain't no party like a Holy Spirit party 'cause a Holy Spirit party don't stop!" he proclaimed with a hip-hop cadence.

His talk drew from a slideshow presentation of Scripture, quotes from several religious figures, statistical charts and pop culture references. It also extracted data that warned about the dangers of some social media becoming too much of a negative influence. Espaillat incorporated it all, switching between English and Spanish, imploring how the love of God, the mercy of Jesus and the catapulting effect of the Holy Spirit can help us "stop maintaining the status quo."

At one point, a group of high school cheerleaders attending a national "spirit" event at the other end of the Convention Center exhibit halls gathered outside the arena doors to hear what was going on.

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The 55-minute high-octane revival led to one of the longest and loudest ovations inside the arena in recent memory. Espaillat then asked the attendees to stand, close their eyes, open their hands and pray for healing.

Afterward, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the U.S., said Espaillat's keynote talk "was not just a show, it was something much deeper."

"His style appeals to a lot of people, younger people," said Pierre as he greeted people leaving the convention center area. "But what I liked was the message, with very sound theology and in line with what Pope Francis wants for us, to communicate the Gospel to the people using their language and their capacity to understand."

Loreena Garcia, a 37-year-old catechist leading the confirmation program at St. Joseph Church in La Puente, said that as a social media evangelizer and content creator she appreciated how Espaillat found common ground in a world where Catholic messaging too often defaults into one extreme or another.

"I think sometimes as a youth you feel stifled by different things in the church, and there isn't enough about how 'I'm just trying to live my Catholic life,'" she said. "I try to live that. It was empowering when he said, 'The power of Jesus is you and you need to go out and be.' I loved his youthful exuberance and his fire. He was amazing. He showed you could experience Jesus with all your senses."

In today's troublesome and turbulent world, several workshops focused on themes that dealt with practical ways one can faithfully navigate. Allusions to O'Connell were often invoked as examples.

Jesuit Fr. Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries, said in his arena talk about apostolic wholeness and the kinship of God that he was once asked, "How do you talk about faith?" He responded, "I don't."

"Faith can get stuck in your head as creedal statements and doctrine," he said. "But Bishop Dave (O'Connell) allowed his faith to find its way to his feet. … He stood with those feet with the poor, the powerless, and the voiceless. He stood with those whose dignity had been denied. And those whose burdens are more than they could carry.

"So do you talk about faith? Eh, not so much. Dave embodied this."

Julianne Stanz, in a workshop titled "Ministering in the Midst of Disruption," talked about how her Irish-Celtic upbringing was the initial basis for her friendship with O'Connell. Stanz, who led the worship program at the Sunday prayer service for the bishop, said his spiritual guidance and relatable experiences helped her write the book, "Braving the Thin Places: Celtic Wisdom to Create a Space for Grace."

Stanz explained the nuances of the Celtic cross with its circle embedded in the cross as a representation of the sun, and O'Connell's works "made our lives better by the light that he had."

Organizers said more than 10,000 registered to attend the Feb. 24-26 events in person, and more than 5,000 young people and chaperones also came to Youth Day Feb. 23. Its theme of Strive4Live included a Mass with Gomez presiding and concelebrated by more than 40 priests.

Gomez also celebrated the weekend's closing Sunday Mass Feb. 26. There, he invited participants to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and "let the Spirit

open our eyes to see the signs of the times."

The Spirit, he assured them, is at work today "in our parishes and schools and in our communities."

"We see young families not afraid to go against the grain of the culture, living their faith with zeal and joy, striving to be everyday saints, raising their kids to know Jesus and to live for him."

"It's happening," he added. "There's a new awakening, a new religious revival beginning."

[Tom Hoffarth writes for Angelus News, the online news outlet of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.]