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Youth Day 2013 kicks off LA Congress with music, Mass

by Porsia Tunzi

NCR Today
LA Congress

Anaheim, Calif. — Buses lined the streets near the Anaheim Convention Center while teens made their way to the entrance, excited for a day spent in solidarity with fellow young Catholics and, yes, a day off from school.

Youth Day 2013 had begun.

Youth Day's theme, "Keep Calm -- God's Got This," flashed across the backdrop behind the stage and remained there the entire day.

Jeremy and Ryan, a music group from Moorpark, Calif., began Youth Day with a bang. I couldn't help but join in the dancing and singing as they performed for nearly 14,000 teens and adults gathered in the Convention Center arena Thursday morning.

Jacob & Matthew were next.

"Just remember -- no matter where you are, even if you are lost or are struggling with being Catholic, 'God will forever love you,'" said Matthew, a member of Jacob & Matthew, to the large crowd between songs, a reminder that "God's got this." A mix of upbeat and soulful tunes invited teens to praise God throughout the entire day.

"I feel like I belong here -- that everyone feels what I feel," said Greg Aponte, an emcee during the morning and youth leader at Nativity parish in El Monte, Calif.

"I can come be myself -- I don't have to hide being Catholic," said Nicole Morgan, a youth leader with

Aponte at Nativity parish.

Fr. R. Tony Ricard, a priest from New Orleans, danced his way to the stage. Ricard urged the youth to "just be who you are -- who God has called you to be." He reminded them, "You are destined for greatness, but you must believe; you must have faith." Toward the end of his talk, Ricard shared a piece of his own story of rebuilding his community after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005. He said he never thought he'd be someone traveling from place to place, speaking to youth and sharing his story yet he believed it was God working through him. He said he answered when God called.

"If you allow God to use you," Ricard said to the crowd, "your life can be a testimony to others."

Youth Day was filled with energy and joy. Whether teens were hearing talks in the arena or various rooms within the Convention Center, they were guaranteed to be inspired.

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"You can't leave here and not be changed," said Louis Avelar, another youth leader at Nativity parish in El Monte, Calif.

During lunch, Jeremy and Ryan talked to *NCR* about why they do music ministry.

"We have the ability to build bridges between every day, secular life and God through music -- it's incredible," Jeremy Shoop said.

Both Shoop, 31, and Ryan Clouse, 29, have been playing music for nearly 15 years and are currently music ministers at Holy Cross Church in Moorpark. They brought along four teens from their parish choir to perform with them: Jeff Baker, 18; Cameron Carlson, 16; Elias Blaset, 19; and James Bennington, 17.

And what would Youth Day be without celebrating Mass? Archbishop Jose Gomez of the Los Angeles archdiocese presided over the Mass with fellow bishops, priests and seminarians.

"You are the present and future of our church," Gomez said in his homily, "and I am honored to be here with you today."

Katie Hernandez, director of religious education and confirmation coordinator at Our Lady of Malibu parish in Malibu, Calif., talked to *NCR* about why she brings teens to Youth Day.

"Youth Day gives teens an opportunity to experience a wider church at work," Hernandez said. "They are taken out of their comfort zone -- and that's a good thing."

Speaking of a wider church, assistant youth minister at Sacred Heart parish in Lancaster, Calif., Philip Trejo, talked with his brother, Jimmy, using FaceTime. Jimmy Trejo is currently serving in Afghanistan with the US military, and Philip Trejo wanted to share with him the united experience of Youth Day. "It was great to see my brother and share this experience with him," Philip told *NCR*. Jimmy had been to Youth Day in years past and now was able to relive the experience with the help of technology and his brother.

This is Youth Day -- a place that brings people together, especially teens; a place that rekindles the spirit; and a place of friendship, joy and hope for a better future.

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