2015 Congress Special Issue
This is a special Religious Education Conference issue of The Tidings, the weekly newspaper serving the people of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. In it you will find a Q-and-A with Father Chris Bazyouros, who will take the helm of the archdiocesan Office of Religious Education; some reflections from Pope Francis on education and faith; thoughts on Lent and Easter from Father Ronald Rolheiser, whose column runs every week and last but not least, a feature on our beloved Sister Edith Prendergast, RSC, who is stepping down as director of Religious Education this summer.

In the Congress program, Sister Edith explains this year’s theme, “See,” which is inspired by the blind man’s encounter with Jesus (John 9:1-41). It challenges us to “see anew, to peer beneath the surface and see more deeply and broadly. We are invited to open wide not only our physical eyes, but also the eyes of the heart, the eyes of our memory and perceive God’s presence in all of life, in joy, in pain, in struggle.”

Sister Edith, who served on our editorial council for years, has been an inspiration to the staff at The Tidings as well as Vida Nueva, our Spanish-language monthly. We hope our newspapers help our readers “perceive God’s presence in all of life.” And we look forward to continuing our partnership with the Office of Religious Education under the leadership of Father Bazyouros.
Thank you, Sister Edith!

Don’t miss “The Influence of One Life,” an evening that will celebrate Sister Edith Prendergast, RSC, and her more than 25 years of service in the Office of Religious Education.

Saturday, 8:30 p.m., Arena.

Meet Father Chris Bazyouros
Archdiocesan priest will be next to helm Office of Religious Education

This summer, Father Chris Bazyouros will succeed Sister Edith Prendergast, RSC, as director of the Office of Religious Education of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Father Bazyouros, who currently serves in Adult Education in the Religious Education department, grew up as a parishioner of Sts. Francis of Rome in Azusa. He attended their parochial school, Bishop Amat High School in La Puente, Cal Poly Pomona and then St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo. He was ordained in 2003.

Father Bazyouros sat down with The Tidings’ J.D. Long-Garcia to share more about his background and his vision for religious education in the local Church.

JD: Let’s start with an easy question. Who’s your favorite saint?
Father Chris: I don’t know if that’s an easy question. I think it’s a tie right now between Sts. Luke and John. I’ve been working with the Catholic Bible Institute, and I’ve always enjoyed those two accounts, and so they’ve always been very powerful in my own spiritual life, and I identify with the parables. Both of those accounts have been very profound in my own life journey.

Scripture seems to be a pretty central part of your faith. Can you tell me more about that?
I love reading. I love the stories. So Scripture has always been a part of my life. And so when I came to this particular position of Adult Faith Formation (in the Office of Religious Education), and one of my responsibilities was guiding the Catholic Bible Institute, I was really excited.

It’s been amazing to be reintroduced to these passages and to continue to hear some amazing people talk about their passion for scripture, and to help people understand it, so that they can also share that passion with others.

This is where we meet Christ. We meet Christ in the word. He’s the Word of God. It all began with the Apostles telling the story of Jesus. Their experience of Jesus Christ in the word. This is where we meet Christ.

There are many beautiful aspects of the Religious Education Congress. What stood out for you the first time you went?
Just being around so many people who share that faith, and they are seeking to become better at living it and expressing it. So many people drawn together and celebrating our faith, celebrating all the different ways of the way our faith expresses itself. It’s just a very positive energy — coming together as people of faith. I think that’s probably, for me, one of the earliest impressions that I had about what Congress was like for me.

When the Baltimore Catechism was more commonly used, there was a certain approach to religious education.

How have we as a Church adapted our religious education throughout the years?
With the Second Vatican Council, we were reacquainted with the ancient way that the Church brought people into the faith, which is through the catechumenate process. We’re still trying to understand a lot about how impactful that process can be.

So in the General Directory on Catechesis — which is a document that has been propagated from Rome — the catechumenate model is the basis of all catechesis. Learning how to bring people into the faith by journeying with them. Opening their experience to an encounter with Christ is a key component of that.

The issue is, I can’t make you meet Christ. I just have to give you these opportunities and help you be open to it. And when you have the experience, to walk with you as you try to make sense of it and what God is doing in your life.

That is one of the most powerful components, but it’s one that, you know, I can’t schedule it. [laughs]
That is what is exciting about being in catechesis right now … we’re trying to explore all the ways that we can help people encounter Christ. Pope Francis’ talk about a ministry of encounter resonates with people.

When you meet Christ, in some ways, it’s beyond words. I hear that. When that moment takes place, and that person does have their encounter with Christ, it’s on God’s time. Is that right?
We’re just trying to help people be aware that God is present and God wants to interact with each person: wants to enter in this dialogue with each person, and with us as a community. How do we help people open to that?

But that’s only part of it. The second part is, when someone has had this experience with Christ. Then our job is to just help them learn how to articulate that … to articulate how to integrate this experience into our faith journey.
I can’t encounter Jesus and not be transformed. I can choose not to let the transformation go deep. And see, the catechist helps the person to not be afraid to let the transformation go deeper.

That’s beautiful. That’s exciting work.
It is exciting work! It’s amazing. And so all of us in the Office, we’re excited about learning how to do that in ways that can help parishes take this on. And parishes understand, and the catechists especially, how to best create this environment.
And it’s not just religious ed programs. It’s not just confirmation programs. We need to help parishes communities create this experience, create this environment where people are given the opportunity to encounter Christ.

You’re reaching out to people at different age groups. Do you think there will be a time when we don’t do adult faith formation? If we did the children’s catechesis perfectly, would that be sufficient?
This is the crux of it. Jesus called adults to be his disciples. You know, the human person has an extraordinary capacity for growth and development. It’s only we at a certain place [who] say, “Well, I’m an old dog. I can’t learn any more new tricks.” And then you see this person who’s 80, running marathons and taking university courses and earning degrees.

Where is the real barrier? Our faith is not something we just get. It’s a living relationship. And I always call people to think about a relationship with a significant person in their life — like a parent or a sibling. And can you tell me that such relationships haven’t changed from the time you were 5, 15, 25? It can’t be, because we grow and we become who we are. Those relationships grow. It’s the same with God. God is that living reality, that person. And so there won’t be a time when you won’t have to [grow]. There’s always something more.

“I can’t make you meet Christ. I just have to give you these opportunities and help you be open to it. And when you have the experience, to walk with you as you try to make sense of it and what God is doing in your life.”
The Greeks had the sense that because God is infinite, you can never stop deepening your relationship with God. And so even some theologians from the Greek school would say that even when you get to the Kingdom of Heaven, you’re going continue to move deeper and forward in your relationship with God.

**What are you looking forward to as director?**

From my standpoint, coming in as a new director, is that there are so many wonderful things that we are doing. There’s a great spirit of cooperation and collaboration in the office. And to be able to continue that, but also to be able to discern where God is leading us now.

**How does Pope Francis’ papacy affect your approach to religious education?**

It reaffirms that catechesis is a holistic integration of faith. It’s not just that I know what my Church teaches, but I live how my Church lives. I speak how my Church speaks. And we’ve been focusing on institutions a lot, but a lot conforms to Christ.

The power of attraction that Christ had was the complete and holistic sense that people could perceive of God’s presence with him. There was nothing hidden. He simply was. He spoke and he acted and he was always doing what God asked him to do. What he was meant to do.

I think people have a similar view when they look at Pope Francis. They see someone who not just talks about caring for the poor, but is asking to have showers put in the bathrooms in the Vatican, so that homeless can go in and get a shower and feel clean. And so it reminds us in our office of what Blessed Paul VI said: Modern man does not believe teachers anymore. He believes witnesses. And if a modern man believes a teacher, it is because the teacher is a witness.
Pope Francis on education and faith
Excerpts from ‘Evangelii Gaudium’

“Catechesis is a proclamation of the word and is always centered on that word, yet it also demands a suitable environment and an attractive presentation, the use of eloquent symbols, insertion into a broader growth process and the integration of every dimension of the person within a communal journey of hearing and response.”

“Again and again, the Church has acted as a mediator in finding solutions to problems affecting peace, social harmony, the land, the defense of life, human and civil rights, and so forth. And how much good has been done by Catholic schools and universities around the world! This is a good thing.”

“Youth ministry, as traditionally organized, has also suffered the impact of social changes. Young people often fail to find responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts in the usual structures. As adults, we find it hard to listen patiently to them, to appreciate their concerns and demands, and to speak to them in a language they can understand. For the same reason, our efforts in the field of education do not produce the results expected. The rise and growth of associations and movements mostly made up of young people can be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit, who blazes new trails to meet their expectations and their search for a deep spirituality and a more real sense of belonging. There remains a need, however, to ensure that these associations actively participate in the Church’s overall pastoral efforts.”

“Yet we desire even more than this; our dream soars higher. We are not simply talking about ensuring nourishment or a ‘dignified sustenance’ for all people, but also their ‘general temporal welfare and prosperity.’ This means education, access to health care and, above all, employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labor that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives.”
Easter should be an eye opener

In honor of the 2015 Religious Education Congress’ theme of “See/Ver,” The Tidings is reprinting a Father Ronald Rolheiser 1989 column on Easter and “seeing.”

Easter is mostly about waking up. It’s Easter when God and spring susurrate through the veins of nature, giving frozen earth and frozen hearts a wake-up call. That call is ever needed, because the human proclivity is towards sleep. Without outside revelation, the trumpet blast announcing resurrection and God whispering new life inside of us, our preoccupations and obsessions invariably render us blind as bats.

IN EXILE

BY FATHER RONALD ROLHEISER,OMI

Easter is about eyesight, seeing. George Orwell once summarized our difficulties in this area: “A rather cruel trick I once played on a wasp. He was sucking jam on my plate and I cut him in half. He paid no attention, merely went on with his meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of his severed esophagus. Only when he tried to fly away did he grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to him. It is the same with us. The thing that has been cut away is our soul and there is a period of time … during which we do not notice it.” (Collected Essays, Vol. II, p. 15)

It’s a strange irony! We spend our lives searching for life in its rarity and we hardly notice Easter and spring. It’s Easter and we are heavy in spirit. Resurrection is all around and we are feeling old! Why? Why are we so blind to spring and resurrection?

Classical spiritual writers have always affirmed a connection between morality and epistemology. That’s a sophisticated hell out of us. Mostly resurrection and God whispering new life inside of us, our preoccupations and obsessions invariably render us blind as bats.

Father Rolheiser will be speaking twice during Congress:
> Friday, March 13, 10-11:30 a.m. “Seeing What Lies Most Deeply Within us: Developing Mystical Eyes” (1-22)
> Saturday, March 14, 10-11:30 a.m. “Seeing with Eyes of the Soul: The Challenge to Cure Our Blindness” (4-22)

The Tidings | March 12, 2015

Father Rolheiser is a specialist in the field of spirituality and systematic theology. His website is www.ronrolheiser.com.

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A faith-filled journey
Sister Edith Prendergast reflects on her service that has taken her from a small Irish town to the world beyond

BY BRENDA REES

A fter she steps down as Director of the Office of Religious Education (ORE) for the Los Angeles Archdiocese, Religious Sister of Charity Edith Prendergast wants to take a sabbatical and visit places that have deep meaning for her: London (where she got her education certificate and was exposed to great art and museums), Boston College (where she received her Master’s Degree in Theology and met famed theologian Karl Rahner) and, of course, her Irish homeland.

“I want the land to lay fallow for a while,” she explains. “I need time to regenerate the fields.”

The metaphor is appropriate coming from the daughter of an Irish farmer who taught his six children the value of faith and action at an early age. For Sister Edith, it’s a faith that has challenged and nurtured her throughout the years. And it’s a faith she passionately wants to continue to share with others in a ministry that has included nearly 35 years of leadership in the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

“It was my family who laid the foundation for my vocation,” she says, recalling praying the rosary with her mother Catherine and taking walks with her father, Richard. “I learned a lot from my father; he had a Celtic spirituality of God in all things: the trees, plants, animals, us.”

Richard also taught her the power of charity. Often, the family home became a refuge for travelers or homeless who would knock on their door in the cold of winter looking for a place to spend the night. “We had an attic and they would stay the night and have breakfast with us the next morning,” she says. That experience paved the way for Sister Edith to later choose a vocation with the Sisters of Charity in 1959, taking a vow to serve the poor.

After her novitiate in Dublin, Sister Edith went to London to be trained as an educator, majoring in ecclesiastical art and divinity – two areas close to her heart that would become her unofficial ministerial themes, helping her bring people closer to God using the power of art, poetry and music. It was natural for Sister Edith to combine the two because as she says, “In the early years, catechism was done all through images. That was how people learned about their religion.”


Sister Edith next continued her education, enrolling as a graduate student in Boston College majoring in scripture. She would later return to parish work in Southern California. By this time, Sister Edith had led many retreats, developing a creative and spiritual experience based on scripture that also included poetry. Her work caught the attention of Msgr. Torgerson, who was the associate ORE director at the time, and who, after one interview with her, decided to offer her the position as the first youth ministry consultant.

“She has a great spirit for people and can see things in people that we can’t always see in ourselves,” he says. “We worked together on developing retreat programs for our Catholic schools and high schools as well as developing programs in youth ministry — it was the first time the archdiocese was involved in this outreach.”

From that platform, Sister Edith stepped up to duties as ORE associate director and was in charge of Youth Day for the Religious Education Congress, and then the entire Congress once she was named ORE director soon afterward.

Under her leadership, she expanded Congress, the largest gathering of Catholics in the nation, to reach a broad array of church ministries: social outreach, justice efforts and personal and human development, in addition to religious education and catechetical ministry. Multicultural workshops were added with a great emphasis on engaging Spanish-speaking communities. She was particularly involved in Youth Day, giving rousing and inspirational opening addresses.

“She took a great event and made it bigger and better. It is without question the best gathering anywhere in the world every year,” says Dan Mulhall, director of professional development and Hispanic ministry at RCL Benziger. “Only a papal visit might top it!”

“The liturgies are aesthetically appealing and create a sense of devotion and prayerfulness that cannot be expressed in words,” agrees Msgr. David Sork, pastor at St. John Fisher and former ORE director. “If anyone should have any doubt of the effectiveness of the reforms that came out of Vatican II, let them come to the Congress. The leadership of Sister Edith...
It started like planting a seed that soon blossomed. … We want to form and inform adults without forgetting the children or the youth. Transforming lives, that’s our mission.”

— Sister Edith Prendergast, RSC

Overall, the influence of Congress has spread “beyond the shores” with similar gatherings in Ireland, Canada and England taking their cue from the Anaheim event.

In addition to shepherding Congress, Sister Edith expanded the nature of religious education, especially with the creation of the Bible Institute, an idea that was brought to her originally by Kay Murdy and Dorothy King, two laywomen. “It started like planting a seed that soon blossomed,” she says, pointing out that now the ORE commissions about 2,000 catechists and leaders (many of them young adults) at the annual ceremony.

“We want to form and inform adults without forgetting the children or the youth,” she explains. “Transforming lives, that’s our mission.”

All during her time at the archdiocese, her staff and colleagues have been enthusiastic about her leadership.

“She has a genuine respect for each person, and is able to bring forth their unique gifts,” says Jo Rotunno, publisher emerita of RCL Benziger, who worked with Sister Edith in various roles over the years. “If she had chosen a different path in life, we might be honoring her as a retiring CEO.”

“What I admire most in Sister Prendergast is her enthusiasm for the ministry, her commitment to make catechesis and youth ministry strong and viable in all the parishes,” says Maria Sedano, who served as her associate for more than 15 years.

“One of the most incredible gifts Sister ever gave me as one of her coworkers was the freedom to fail. I’m serious,” says Mike Norman, former associate director. “It is so empowering to have someone that supports you so completely. She has, in turn, helped me to become that kind of leader, as well.”

In addition to these duties in office, Sister Edith attended Claremont School of Theology, receiving a doctorate in ministry; served on the board of directors for the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (then National Conference of Diocesan Directors) to help increase lay involvement in spiritual formation and religious education and facilitated the International Consultation for Adult Religious Education, sharing stories and best practices with others across the globe.

Determined that people should be able to pursue a Master’s degree in Theology even if money is an issue, she set up her own endowment for laity. Every year, 12-15 people receive partial tuition scholarships toward their education which, in turn, they will share with others.

“I think if you are passing on the faith, you have to have depth in yourself,” she explains.

Throughout all her many responsibilities, Sister Edith continues to participate in many catechetical and ecclesial events, often as an inspirational speaker and/or spiritual guide — a role she cherishes.

“As swimmers dare to lie face to the sky and water bears them, as hawks rest upon air and air sustains them, so would I learn to attain freefall, and float into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace, knowing no effort earns that all-surrounding grace.”
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