

Congress coordination: Behind the scenes of the R.E. Congress

BY J.D. LONG-GARCIA
THE TIDINGS

By some reckoning, this will be the 60th Religious Education Congress organized by the Los Angeles Archdiocese. The annual event, known worldwide, draws upwards of 40,000 participants each year.

This year, Congress brings 199 speakers who will present 282 workshops, including 70 in

Spanish and eight in Vietnamese. Youth Day sold out again this year, with around 15,000 young Catholics scheduled to attend the Thursday event featuring 30 workshops, thanks to the leadership of Christina Lamas.

Jan Pedroza, Congress program coordinator, said the annual event wouldn't be possible without the hundreds



PHOTOS BY J.D. LONG-GARCIA

of volunteers. Some have been volunteering for more than 40 years.

For years Paulette Smith,

associate director of the Office of Religious Education and Congress event coordinator, along with Pedroza, have been leading much of the behind the scenes efforts to put on the largest religious education event of its kind in the world.

"There are countless volunteers, starting with Youth Day, that make this run smoothly," Pedroza said, noting the volunteers on the registration, liturgy and Congress committees. "So many people tell us Congress is their retreat. The volunteers really help us welcome all of these people."

Congress participants regularly hail from nearly every state in the nation, as well as from dozens of countries overseas. Serving these participants powers Congress organizers through long hours, often into the wee hours of the night.

"What sustains us is reflecting on the people who are attending and the experiences those folks have," Smith said. "It's their once-a-year shot in the arm. It's all about creating an opportunity for people to have an encounter with Christ."

The path to Smith's role as associate director and co-coordinator of Congress began when she played guitar and sang at a folk Mass. The director of religious education at her parish asked her to get more involved.

Smith, a master catechist, eventually became a director of religious education herself before becoming the regional coordinator for the San Pedro



Congress coordinators Paulette Smith (left) and Jan Pedroza.

Region. She became the associate director in 2006.

Pedroza, who converted to Catholicism when she was 22, worked in early childhood ministry before joining the Congress team in 2000. She had served for a time as a part-time director of religious education (DRE).

"No DRE job is part-time, and you can print that," said Pedroza, who is also a master catechist.

"Being involved with Congress is one of the most rewarding jobs you can have in this archdiocese," she added.

'Boundless Mercy'

Each year, members of the Office of Religious Education meditate on the Sunday readings for the weekend of Congress to develop a theme. This year's theme, "Boundless Mercy," evolved from the Gospel reading of the woman at the well and pairs with the Jubilee Year of Mercy declared by Pope Francis. Artist Valerie McCray then takes on the difficult assignment of illustrating a theme.

"We look at contemporary issues and see how we can really be a Church that is aware of those issues and be connected," Smith said. "We can really pay attention to the universality of the Church."

That includes Congress' "sacred space," an area at the Anaheim Convention Center

Please see **CONGRESS** page 10

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