

Congress Youth Day 'calls out' 15,000 young Catholics



The Religious Education Congress Youth Day offered the opportunity for dialogue, faith sharing and fellowship for 15,000 high school youth March 22 in Anaheim. To warm up the crowd at Youth Day rally, teen volunteers called on members of the audience to answer questions like, "If Jesus had a gift card to iTunes, what kind of music would he buy?"

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
ELISABETH DEFFNER

"Everybody in here is an iPod," Mike Patin told the 7,400 Catholic youth that crowded the Anaheim Convention Center Arena March 22.

"But some of us are playing like a paperweight — and some of us are playing like a doorstop."

The arena hushed as attendees of the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress Youth Day absorbed what the keynote speaker was saying.

Holding aloft the iPod his daughter had given him as a Christmas gift, he confessed his unwillingness to learn how to use the gadget — and the tension that resulted between his daughter and him. He'd used the iPod as a paperweight and tried it out as a doorstop, outraging his daughter, who told him flatly that he insulted her as he failed to take advantage of all the amazing things his gift was capable of doing.

"We are all iPods, Patin said; each person is a gift, and each person has received the gift of life and countless talents from God. But what do we do with those talents? Do we, ignore our capabilities and keep operating at the lowest possible level?"

"Quit being a doorstop!" Patin cried. "You may not be able to play everything on this thing, but you better start figuring out what you're good at."

"I don't want to go back to God and say, 'Thanks very much! I used it as a doorstop.'"

His talk — titled, appropriately enough, "Sync-tification"—went on to address the ways in which we can all connect to our power source, how to install and run the apps the Church makes available to us in

the sacraments, and how we are all called to be music to each other, playing out the Gospel.

"You can only do that if you're plugged in, and have your speakers on," Patin concluded.

'Really listen to Him'

Filled with humor, Patin's workshop followed the rally that opened Youth Day and highlighted the theme of "Called Out: Challenge Accepted," helping the nearly 15,000 attendees focus on the ways God may be calling to them, challenging them — and what they should do in response.

"Really listen to Him and say yes to Him," said Archbishop José Gomez in his homily during the Eucharistic liturgy. "Try to do everything for God — with a generous heart. You will find the happiness you are looking for."

"Let us make that our prayer today: to do what is most agreeable to God [and that He] give us the strength and courage to do it."

Focusing on God's will during an event like Youth Day — surrounded by thousands of other young Catholics literally wearing their faith on their sleeves (many parish groups wore matching T-shirts declaring their parish affiliation) — is one thing; but speakers also addressed the difficulty in following God's will at school, at home, on dates, and at work.

"Why is our Catholic life



Keynote speaker Mike Patin explained to the thousands of youth attending Youth Day that they are iPods — and that they can undertake "sync-tification" by connecting to their power source and using the apps provided by the Catholic Church in the form of sacraments.

separate from our everyday life?" demanded comedian Judy McDonald in her workshop.

Many of us compartmentalize our lives, isolating God in one box, so to speak, so that his will cannot leak into the boxes containing other facets of our lives — family, friends, grades. That is our own wrongful thinking, McDonald said.

"God never takes himself out of the secular," she said. "Jesus doesn't only want to be in 'Jesus boxes.' He wants to be in every facet of your life."

McDonald's humor acted on the high blood sugar that, she quipped, attendees



Youth filling the Anaheim Convention Center Arena are encouraged to sing out during the Eucharistic Liturgy March 22.

of her workshop had acquired during the lunch period immediately prior to her workshop. Silly accents, riffs on Catholic kitsch, and an explanation of why God made so many kinds of snakes ("They're so easy!" she said, pretending to roll clay between her palms) padded the real message of her presentation: that God never leaves us, and wants to enter into even the darkest corners of our hearts.

Abused as a child, McDonald shut God out of her pain because it was such a dark and dirty place, she said. And though she tried to live God's will — leaving behind her dreams of television stardom to "do comedy for Jesus" — she found herself sinking deeper into the darkness, wishing for death.

But, she continued, the Lord placed people in her life who have helped her to see that she had to open up to Him — she had to let him into the pain. Though she still struggles to recover from what she suffered through as a child, she is leaving the darkness behind.

"Jesus didn't put you here just to feel bad," she said simply. "There's hope."

"It touched me," said Luka Simatovic, 14, following McDonald's workshop. He and Patrick McNicol, 16, both students at Newbury Park High School, were attending Youth Day for the first time with a group from St. Julie Biliart Church in Newbury Park.

Mary Thompson came to Youth Day with a large group from St. Andrew's Newman Center in Riverside — a group that included another first-time attendee: her youngest daughter, Molly, 14.

Thompson encouraged all four of her children to attend Youth Day, remembering the impact it had made on her when she attended at age 17.

"For the first time, I was with a huge group of Catholic people, and I finally got it — that other people did the same thing," said Thompson.

"It's a very moving experience." **TD**



Bishop Alemany High School sophomore Gypsy Castellano, a parishioner at St. Didacus in Sylmar, feared she was going to die when she needed surgery to remove a cyst from her ovary, she said during the Youth Day Eucharistic liturgy. But looking back, she sees that experience as a call from God to place her trust in him.