

Joy of the Gospel: Bishop, local Catholics explore missionary discipleship at national convocation

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By Mary Jansen



Bishop Gerald Barnes led a delegation of Catholics from the Diocese of San Bernardino to Orlando, Florida July 1-4 for the historic and wide-ranging Convocation of Catholic Leaders.

Over 3,300 ordained, religious and lay ministers from 155 dioceses came together to assess current pastoral challenges and opportunities in the context of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of the Gospel."

The Diocese of San Bernardino was represented by 25 participants including Bishop Barnes. The delegation included 13 Diocesan staff, two pastors, one parochial vicar, and nine parish lay leaders. Prior to the convocation, the delegation had two online training sessions with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) organizers as well as a meeting organized by Deacon Mike Jelley at the Pastoral Center.

The convocation began and ended with liturgy. Over 100 Bishops and three Cardinals processed in at each of the four liturgies at the four day-gathering. The liturgies created space for quiet reflection on the Gospel.

The first day, the delegates met with other stakeholders in similar roles in the Church: bishops, pastors/priests, diocesan leaders, parish leaders, leaders in movements, lay apostolates and new communities, and organizational and institutional leaders like Catholic universities, religious orders and hospitals. This was an opportunity to gather and talk about the current landscape and who is missing in these ministries.

The first plenary session, "Charting the Landscape and Mission Field," spoke about presenting the Gospel message from a position of confidence and hope. Pope Francis says often that the Catholic Church is a field hospital after a battle. We have the wounded and many in need of mercy and grace. In this context the V Encuentro Process and the African-American experience as well as women in leadership in the Church were discussed.

This conversation set the tone for the 22 breakout sessions such as "The Reality of Singleness in the Church" and "The Rise of the 'Nones' and Understanding Inactive and Disconnected Catholics" as well as "The Impact of Immigration on Catholic Life in the United States." Although in the Diocese of San Bernardino, 70% of our Catholics are of Hispanic origins and our diocesan leadership mirrors our ethnic diversity; the USCCB placed significant importance on knowing the stories of our Hispanic brothers and sisters as well as encouraging a place at the leadership table for them in all the dioceses of the United States.

The breakouts were not workshops. Each had a panel of experts and questions were taken and answered, but there was also time for small and large groups to share best practices from their dioceses, parishes and organizations.

"There was a lot of honesty and authenticity in the dialogues," said Lynne De La Torre, Digital Media Specialist for the Diocese and one of the 25 who participated in the Convocation. "There was no holding back."

The afternoon Plenary Session, "The Radical Call to Missionary Discipleship," discussed how as missionary disciples, Catholics must be rooted in their faith. If we want to go out; we must first go "in." One of the panelists, Sherry Weddell from the Catherine of Siena Institute, said "Someone is out there waiting for what you need to give to them. It matters that you say 'yes.'"

The next morning, a Eucharistic Procession and Benediction was held and the plenary session topic was "Going to the Peripheries." The keynote speakers spoke of the material and spiritual peripheries of sin, ignorance, self-deception, injustice and the wounded. The panelists shared their stories of working with urban African American youth in the jails, families on the Rio Grande border, farmers around the world struggling to grow crops due to global warming, and the 71% of "nones" who love Pope Francis and his message of God's mercy.

The second round of breakouts ranged from "The Marginalization of Motherhood" to "From Inclusion to Belonging: Persons with Disabilities and the Deaf Community" and "Honoring Our Wisdom Figures: The Role of the Elderly and Gift of Life at All Stages." Again, there were 22 topics including discussions about youth and young adults, incarceration, same-sex attraction and victims of sex abuse. The afternoon breakout topics discussed practical strategies for revitalizing the local community, ministry with migrants, caring for God's Creation, civil dialogue and healing divisions, engaging inactive Catholics and addressing violence and racism in our communities, to name a few.

The final day, the Fourth of July, brought two keynote speakers, Patrick Lencioni and Bishop Robert Barron of Los Angeles to create "Spirit-Filled Evangelizers Equipped for Excellence." These two speakers offered years of experience teaching to a secular audience the wisdom of Jesus Christ's leadership style and uncompromising values that connect us to the divine.

The Diocesan delegation was commissioned to bring home insights and inspiration, ultimately to help all the baptized to embrace their own call to Missionary Discipleship. Father Tyler Tripp, who made the trip to Orlando, said the themes of the Convocation called the group to self examination.

"We have to first ask ourselves – why am I Catholic? What is the Church?" says Fr. Tripp, Parochial Vicar at St. John XXIII Parish in Rialto-Fontana. "When we can answer those questions then we can bring the Good News to those we encounter."

To watch the videos of the plenary sessions and liturgies go to: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/get-involved/meetings-and-events/usccb-convocation-2017.cfm>.

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