

Mid-Atlantic Congress attracts largest crowd ever

As the book of the Gospels was enthroned in a prayer service to open the fifth annual Mid-Atlantic Congress Feb. 4, a dozen women originally from Cameroon greeted the word of God with chanting and dancing.

Led by Emambu Beatrice Fomanka, members of the Catholic Women Association, dressed in colorful garb depicting the Blessed Virgin Mary, used brooms to symbolically sweep up the congress attendees in the word. The CWA Immaculate Heart of Mary Branch is based at St. Gabriel Parish, Woodlawn.

The prayer service framed the opening general session for the Feb. 4-6 2016 Mid-Atlantic Congress, which serves pastoral and administrative leaders in the church – at the parish and diocesan level, professional staff and volunteers.

Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, archbishop of Galveston-Houston, reflected on the words of Luke's Gospel that had been proclaimed in song by Deacon Mark S. Loepker of Our Lady of the Fields Parish in Millersville. The cardinal noted that the Pharisees were complaining that Jesus ate and drank with sinners and tax collectors. Jesus responded to their "murmurings" with "the parable of searching for the lost" – the lost sheep and the lost coin.

"All the lost are actively sought out and brought home," he said, noting that the passage helped set out his theme, "Becoming a Disciple." He said "disciple" is an elementary and substantive word.

“A disciple is a follower, is a learner, is an adherent to another,” he said. “Becoming a disciple is to become a learner and a follower.”

The cardinal noted that St. Ignatius, in his early third-century letter to the Ephesians, written while he was on his way to be eaten by lions for his belief in Christ, called himself a beginner as a disciple: “I am not giving you orders as though I was a person of importance. Even if I am a prisoner for the name of Christ, I am not yet made perfect in Jesus Christ. I am now beginning to be a disciple, and I speak to you as a fellow disciple. It is you who should be strengthening me by your faith, your encouragement and your serenity.”

Cardinal DiNardo noted the importance that Ignatius gave to strength, encouragement and serenity as characteristics of one becoming a disciple, while on his way to his own death.

The cardinal pointed out that the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston has the dubious distinction of more prisons than any of the 15 dioceses in Texas. On one of his pastoral visits to a prison, he was to confirm seven non-Catholics who had been previously baptized in other churches and three Catholics who had never been confirmed, as well as one man who was to be baptized and confirmed and receive first holy Communion.

“Do you know what it must be like to step forward in a jail, in a big prison, and to declare, ‘I want to become Catholic’?”

He further recounted the story of Eric, who was receiving the three sacraments of initiation. After receiving Communion, he was off to the side, on his knees with his catechist, and he was sobbing, Cardinal DiNardo said. As a choir sang, “We are one body, one body in Christ, and we do not stand alone,” each of the others who received Communion passed by Eric and patted him on the shoulders.

“When you’re a disciple in the presence of the Eucharist, something happens to you. You’re transformed. ... Body broken, blood poured out. He became a witness to that,” the cardinal said.

“That’s what the Eucharist does to someone who is becoming a disciple.”

More than 1,350 participants from more than 60 dioceses attended the 2016 Mid-Atlantic Congress, more than any other year. The reach extended beyond the Mid-Atlantic region, with participants from as far as Boise, Idaho; Santa Fe, N.M.; and Miami, Fla. The annual conference is co-sponsored by the Association of Catholic Publishers and the Archdiocese of Baltimore, in partnership with the Leadership Roundtable.

The congress also included a half dozen boot camps and more than 70 workshops and breakout sessions, including a track in Spanish. Topics included everything from liturgy to music to youth ministry to staff development to how parishes can support hurting families.

A separate track for bishops and their senior staffs, sponsored by the Archdiocese of Baltimore and the Leadership Roundtable, was attended by about 40 people, including 16 bishops. The track provided workshops and small-group discussions for bishops and their key personnel to discuss leadership, management and planning.

Also see:

[Catholics converge on Annapolis; opposing assisted suicide big draw for some](#)

[‘Simple, not silly’: Children’s questions become book by Pope Francis](#)