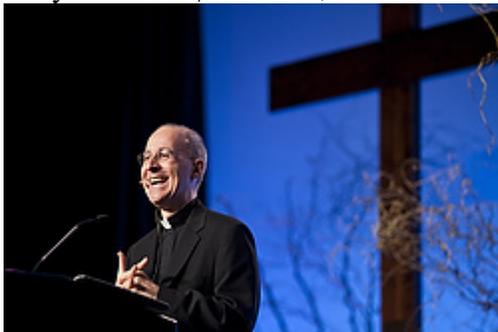


## Bishop urges religious education leaders to nourish hope

Jerry Filteau | Mar. 14, 2012



Jesuit Fr. James Martin smiles as he speaks about hope to those gathered March 9 at the inaugural Mid-Atlantic Congress for Pastoral Leadership in Baltimore. (CNS photo/Tom McCarthy Jr., Catholic Review)

**BALTIMORE** -- On the first day of a new Mid-Atlantic Congress for Pastoral Leadership, Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., urged the gathering of religious education coordinators and others to support one another and be hopeful even when the going gets tough.

"Hope is the necessary breath of our ministry," he said.

"The work you do is tough," he said. "It can be discouraging, [but] you are the rainbows of life."

The March 8-10 congress in Baltimore drew about 1,000 parish or diocesan religious education coordinators, youth ministry leaders and others in pastoral leadership positions from 65 dioceses, mainly in the Eastern and Midwestern United States.

On the final day, several hundred more pastoral leaders from parishes in the Baltimore Archdiocese, a cosponsor of the congress, joined the gathering for what was labeled "Parishioner Day," where several of the day's 19 breakout sessions focused specifically on themes of effective parish leadership.

"Witness Hope!" was the theme of the congress, the first such major regional gathering of Catholic religious education leaders since 2009, when the East Coast Conference for Religious Education held its last meeting.

That conference, held annually for 36 years, regularly drew 1,000 to 2,000 participants to meetings in Washington and in its heyday often made national news with its list of nationally and internationally known speakers.

Like the new congress, the East Coast Conference was geared toward professional development and the renewal, networking and re-energizing of those engaged in parish leadership and ministry, especially in catechetics, religious education and youth ministry.

But the East Coast Conference was independent of the church and, with a clear bias toward liberal church views, it gradually lost support from a number of bishops and pastors in its latter years.

The new congress, which included official (Baltimore Archdiocese) sponsorship, was more centrist in its theological or ecclesial focus while continuing the professional renewal, support and development themes of its predecessor.

An *NCR* source familiar with the situation said despite the long contributions of the East Coast Conference to catechetical and religious education development, church officials who disagreed with the consistently liberal direction of its annual programs began to deny funding for their religious education leaders to attend its meetings.

In 2010, the 37th annual meeting of the East Coast Conference was abruptly canceled well after plans for the gathering had been made public.

To fill the void left by the defunct annual East Coast Conference, the Association of Catholic Publishers, which includes major publishers of Catholic catechetical materials, approached the Baltimore Archdiocese to sponsor the new congress, which they intend to hold annually. The next meeting is scheduled to take place March 7-9, 2013.



Therese Brown, executive director of the publishers' association and general

coordinator of the Mid-Atlantic Congress, said the kind of catechetical and other leaders in dioceses, parishes and Catholic schools has changed considerably in recent years.

"For decades, most ministry leaders were full-time staff, often religious, with master's degrees," she said.

But in recent years, lay ministers are more likely to be part-time staff or volunteers, she said. "They have different needs."

"Without the ECC, there was no catechetical conference on the East Coast to provide for those needs," said Paulist Fr. John Hurley, Baltimore archdiocesan executive director of evangelization and co-chair of the congress, who previously for eight years headed the U.S. bishops' national evangelization office.

The congress featured 75 breakout sessions and 39 master classes that offered participants opportunities for continuing education credits.

In addition to Kicanas, featured keynote speakers were Jesuit Fr. James Martin of *America* magazine, a noted writer on spirituality; Carolyn Woo, new president and CEO of Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. Catholic overseas relief and development organization; and Adele Gonzalez, a theologian specializing in contemporary spirituality and ministry.

With the congress taking place during Lent, one of its highlights was a specially composed Friday evening Way of the Cross featuring unique black-and-white banners of the traditional path of Christ's suffering, death and burial created by Liturgical Press, run by the Benedictines of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn.



The unusual ritual for the devotion, which featured multimedia presentations and

testimonies on suffering and grace from Catholics, was written and directed by Michael Ruzicki, Baltimore archdiocesan coordinator of adult and sacramental formation.

He told Catholic News Service that he saw the Way of the Cross as a "celebration."

"Growing up, I would see Catholics come together to 'celebrate' the cross on Fridays in Lent," he said.

"However, it never seemed like a true celebration. Celebration doesn't need to have clapping, dancing and an overwhelming amount of joy. More so, we know this celebration of the cross ends with the greatest glory of all."

"We wanted to acknowledge that it was a Friday in Lent, but go beyond lamenting and recognize that the Paschal mystery gained us something," Hurley said of the unusual version of the devotion. "We need to celebrate that faith and enrich it."

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