



When I was told that my application to receive funding to attend the 2020 Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, I had only just returned from a running holiday/LSL in New Zealand. Still on a high from running the Queenstown Marathon and then embarking on a ten day driving trip from the South to the North Island with my husband and parents, I was VERY excited at the prospect of heading to the US (although my head was spinning as I tried to think of a way to tell my family!!).

I had heard so many great things about Congress from both Catherine Howison and Nathaniel Winfield. They had had an amazing experience the previous year so I knew a little bit about what it would be like. Well, it's not until you actually get there in Anaheim, California, that you can appreciate the scale of this conference! Amongst the volume of people, we found a few Aussies, one being Sr Rita Malvisi, a Josephite nun studying in Boston, who, at one time, was based in Swan Hill. I know Sr Rita quite well, so it was amazing to see her.

The opening ceremony and welcome were spell bounding! The colour, dance and music totally drew you into the most amazing experience. What a start!

The workshops I had chosen had a very musical theme. I certainly understand the engaging power music has in the liturgy. I was keen to explore and learn how it is used (if any different) as a way of engaging people in the Mass. Steve Angrisano (pictured right) and Sarah Hart were the presenters of my first workshop. I am familiar with their music. Their message was:

- to use music that speaks to the culture of the Church - know the students and be willing to engage and invite.
- We have to speak to them in their language - do they feel like they belong?
- Make the most of your relationships
- Trust that God is working in their hearts.



The takeaway from this is centered around doing what is right in your environment! So as I sat and listened and sang along to songs they use in their respective parishes, I need to remember that it may not work here in Swan Hill! Although things don't have to always include "bells and whistles".

A workshop I attended (that was non-music) was titled "Accompanying LGBTQ Youth and their families". This was a powerful experience as the presenter, Greg Walton, is a father of five children, two who identify as LGBTQIA+. What an amazing lesson this was in understanding the diversity within this community. Many things that I had heard of but didn't really understand. A couple of standouts for me during this session were: "My children aren't my crosses, they are my gift"... "Jesus came for the lost, he did not come for the saved" and lastly, "Most people are separated from God because they don't believe they are loved". He connected how Jesus went to the margins and so must we. People that were the outcast were people he responded to. Part of a clip by Emily Quinn (Ted Talk) was shown in regards to how we don't all fit in a box and it is us that puts shame on each other. I have ended up watching the whole talk and it was very moving.

“What the eye doesn’t see the heart can’t feel.” The last session that I will reflect on was titled “River of Fire” by Sr Helen Prejean (Sister of St Joseph). Most people may know of Sr Helen as the woman who became the spiritual advisor to Matthew Poncelet, the man convicted and sentenced to death for killing two teenagers - Dead Man Walking. Although her session was reflecting the story of her latest book “River of Fire”, there were a lot of references to the story of Dead Man Walking. River was explained as “life moves” and Fire as the Holy Spirit - life moving through the Holy Spirit and in that, we need to trust in the Holy Spirit. Her session was only a glimpse of the enormous amount of work she has dedicated to life to - helping to bring about justice for all! She explained how, after Vatican II, the Sisters began to look at the world for the signs of the times. To act for justice. She explained that Vatican II affirmed conscience. Working for justice for men on death row is her life work. She challenged us with the question “where is the justice in killing a person who is defenceless” (defenceless meaning that person on death row has no defence).

It truly was an amazing experience and I am so grateful to the Ballarat Diocese for offering sponsorship for me to attend.

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