

Arkansans share determination after congress

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



The first National Eucharistic Congress in 83 years drew Arkansans to Indianapolis July 17-21.

More than 60,000 Catholics flocked to Lucas Oil Stadium to celebrate Mass in a host of languages, participate in activities and music and listen to some of well-known Catholic speakers.

Diane Hanley, a parishioner at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Little Rock, decided to attend the National Eucharistic Congress the moment she heard of it — while reading an article in *Arkansas Catholic* at the beginning of the three-year Eucharistic Revival.

“I love the Eucharist and wanted to honor Jesus by attending,” Hanley said. “I had been slightly aware of the International Congress back in 1976 ... At first, I thought this gathering was going to be the same, but I later learned there has not been a National Eucharistic Congress in the U.S. since 1941. So that made this one a must-see event for my lifetime.”

Hanley, who attended with three friends, said it's hard to pick a favorite part of the Congress because all of the different experiences came together to make "a beautiful mosaic."

"The Shroud of Turin exhibit was profound, and the nightly Benediction filled my heart," Hanley said. "The music was a perfect balance of praise and traditional Latin worship, with charismatic expression and even silence. The huge morning Masses were mind-boggling. In addition to the familiar 'big name' speakers we all love, I was stunned by the talk from Msgr. James Shea.

"One aspect that tied it all together was the joy and love shared by just being together with thousands of people who all love Jesus. Many people said it was like a taste of heaven, for that reason. All the fatigue and effort were being offered up to God, so complaints were minimal. Also, it was so encouraging to see the throngs of young vocations and large young families."

After the Congress, Hanley said she is now more determined to live out her faith.

"I have more determination to be bold in speaking of God's salvation, and especially of his gift to us in the Eucharist," Hanley said. "Prayer and Mass are such a privilege. I feel personally beloved by Jesus, our Good Shepherd, and personally called to invite others to share his joy."

Karen Taylor, a parishioner of St. Mary Church in Saint Vincent (Hattiesville), has been following the activities and plans for the Eucharistic Revival from the beginning.

"My interest started with an interview I watched on EWTN with Bishop (Andrew) Cozzens (from the Diocese of Crookston, Minn.)," Taylor said. "I read everything I could find about it on the internet, and when I heard about the Congress, I felt called to go."

Taylor prayed about it, and eventually sent a group text to her children and grandchildren informing them of her pilgrimage plans. Her middle son Charlie and daughter-in-law Patricia Osborn of nearby Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton made all of the arrangements.

Taylor said she has renewed gratitude since returning home from the Congress.

"I plan to say, 'Thank you' to our pastors a lot more often and hope that others will do the

same," Taylor said.

Charlie said he enjoyed the early morning rosary at the Congress, followed by "the most beautiful Mass ever."

"You could really feel the presence of Jesus throughout the entire Mass," Charlie said. "This experience has lead me to be a better member of my parish. I work a lot, (and) this conference has opened my eyes to how much respect I have for Father Hart and all the professionals leaders at Sacred Heart. I need to do more!"

Mailelani Lessenberry, a parishioner of St. Bernard of Clairvaux Church in Bella Vista, attended the Congress with her mother, father and three siblings — brothers Noa, 16, and Kai, 13, and sister Alana, 10. The 17-year-old said her favorite part of the Congress was adoration.

"Every night during the Revival Sessions, we'd have about an hour of guided adoration in the Lucas Oil Stadium," Lessenberry said. "It was an incredible experience. The music was amazing, and being in the stadium with 50,000-plus other Catholics, all adoring and worshipping the body, blood, soul and divinity of our Savior was something that I'll never get to experience the same way again. It brought us all closer to Christ, and it was the highlight of my time at the Eucharistic Congress."

"We wanted to attend the National Eucharistic Congress, because we wanted a family 'vacation' that would bring all of us closer to our faith," said mom Jordyn Lessenberry. "If we never get to attend another Eucharistic Congress, this event will forever be the most important and significant experience I have ever attended."

With the beginning of her freshman year at the University of Dallas right around the corner, Mailelani is more prepared than ever to start class.

"I actually plan on going to daily Mass and adoration as often as I can once I'm in college," Lessenberry said. "There's a chapel on campus, and I want to spend as much time there as possible to continue growing closer to Christ every day."

Anna Woods, a parishioner of Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton, attended the Congress with her father, Deacon Richard Papini of Conway.

Woods said she never could have imagined just how the Congress would impact her.

“The Eucharistic procession through downtown Indianapolis was amazing,” Woods said.

“Seeing all the seminarians, sisters, priest, bishops and then the Eucharist process in front of you and then you join in the Eucharistic procession that just kept going and going. We are still so thankful and blessed we could be a part of this. Rewatching all the Masses and listening to the speakers, you feel being right there all over again...”

Woods is renewed with determination to be a disciple in her parish.

“Going forward, (I will be) continuing our mission of discipleship, sharing the love of Jesus to all, especially those most in need of his mercy and living a Eucharistic life, committing to the ‘Walk with One,’ — trying to get a loved one or friend to return to Church this year...” Woods said.

Father Stephen Hart, pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton and St. Elizabeth Church in Oppelo, said he attended the congress because he felt called to help hear confessions.

“Even though logistically I didn’t have everything figured out until a few weeks beforehand, everything turned out great,” Father Hart said. “I was happy to represent our diocese and my brother priests.”

Father Hart said his favorite thing about event is the same as one of his favorite things to do as a priest: hearing confessions.

“Helping people reconcile themselves to God the Father and to his Church makes everything in me light up,” Father Hart said.

Now that he has returned to his parishes, Father Hart is already thinking of ways to bring what he learned at the Congress to life back at home.

“Sacred Heart recently hosted a ‘Theology on Tap’ at a local brewery, and I talked about my experience of the congress,” Father Hart said. “I also invited several other Catholics in our local area to share their impressions as well. As a pastor, I want to help our faithful take the

‘Walk with One’ idea seriously; if everyone found and accompanied just one person who has been away from our Eucharist, what a difference it would make.”



Mary Kay Scott, a parishioner of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Little Rock, stands outside Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, Ind. (Courtesy Diane Hanley)



(Left to right) Jeremy, Alana, Noa, Mailelani, Jordyn and Kai Lessenberry stand outside the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis, Ind. The family, from St. Bernard of Clairvaux in Bella Vista, made the pilgrimage together. (Courtesy of Mailelani Lessenberry)



Father Stephen Hart takes a photo of his point of view from his seat during the closing Mass July 21 at Lucas Oil Stadium. (Father Stephen Hart)



Karen Taylor, a parishioner of St. Mary Church in Saint Vincent (Hattiesville), shows off the T-shirt she bought at the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis after returning home Aug. 1. (Courtesy Karen Taylor)



Father Stephen Hart of Lake Village shows his view from the eucharistic procession July 20 during the National Eucharistic Congress. (Father Stephen Hart)

Jubilarian known for work as prison minister, crisis counselor

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



When asked by *Arkansas Catholic* how he reached the decision to become a priest, Msgr. Jack Harris smiled wryly before replying.

“Well, I still haven’t made up my mind,” he said. “There wasn’t any point at which it happened. I took a look at it, decided I’d come in and look around and never found a reason to leave.”

There are many things that Msgr. Harris is involved in, but you might not know it — the humble pastor doesn’t talk much about his extensive career in prison ministry as a minister on death row, the fact that he’s a trained crisis counselor or that he’s been a finalist for Catholic Extension’s Lumen Christi Award. Many people don’t even know that he’s a monsignor — he often insists that people refer to him as Father Jack.

Msgr. Harris graduated from Catholic High School in 1965 before attending the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville from 1965 to 1967.

Shortly after, Msgr. Harris chose the seminary over completing a degree and was ordained a priest June 8, 1974. As he celebrates the 50th anniversary of his ordination, Msgr. Harris often wonders how he’s gotten to this place.

“I talk to the Lord about that sometimes,” he said. “Did you call me here, or did I just come in on my own, and you’ve tolerated it?”

For the first 22 years as a priest, Msgr. Harris did juvenile delinquency work and delinquency prevention in Pulaski, Sebastian and Crawford counties.

“That’s really what I believe I was called into the priesthood to do,” Msgr. Harris said. “... You look for the vocation within the vocation. Not everyone called into the priesthood is meant to be a pastor ... you look at what you’re fitted for.”

Msgr. Harris said he often struggled with being a pastor for the first few years after his ordination in Jonesboro and Pine Bluff.

"I remember, in morning prayer every day, to pray for all those people that I so-called 'served' early in the pastorate because I didn't do a very good job at all," he said. "I didn't have any concept of what that ought to be like. ... that was unfortunate. It took a long time for me to figure out, in order for me to be a pastor, that I have to surround myself with the people who know what ought to be done in a parish."

Msgr. Harris tries not to be too controlling when he's in a parish because he often approaches problems as a crisis responder and prison chaplain — he is used to diffusing problems and soothing worries.

As a crisis counselor, he has helped people and groups navigate their trauma and emotions after school shootings and the aftermath of 9/11.

"Those things probably shaped how I approach people more than anything I ever learned in the seminary," Msgr. Harris said.

But he believes working in prison ministry has helped him as a pastor — from comforting and consoling the men who have missed their chances to change their ways, to steering kids away from treacherous paths.

"The way I would describe my work is, I have two parishes, four high schools and one prison," Msgr. Harris said. "In the evening, I'm in a gym somewhere. I stay busy at our ball field here. In the summer, with all the baseball and softball teams and the little ones down here playing everywhere, that's where I'm going to be. ... It's part of what I do, and I like to do it.

That's probably what's been impacted by my prison ministry more than anything, because these are the ones who still have it in front of them. The men I worked with down there (in the prisons), their opportunity came and went, and they lost it somehow. ... All of us are shaped by our history and what we do and in ways we don't know."

On June 8, all four of Msgr. Harris' parishes — St. Joseph Church in Center Ridge and St. Mary Church in Saint Vincent, where he is the pastor, and Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton and St. Elizabeth Church in Oppelo, where he is associate pastor — held a reception for Msgr. Harris.

Linda Boedeker, a parishioner at Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton and Msgr. Harris' former secretary and bookkeeper of 12 years, attended the reception.

"He's one of the most generous, kindest, knowledgeable people as far as the Bible goes," Boedeker said. "He's just so humble. He's one of the most humble people I've ever met. And his prison ministry is so very important too. We periodically took up donations for him and for the prisons."

While Msgr. Harris might not think he's the best pastor, Boedeker disagrees.

"He's the best man I've heard on the altar with his homily," she said. "He has a spiritual meaning behind everything he says on that altar ... There's a point to what he says. He'd say, 'Well, that's enough,' and we'd all say, 'No, that's not enough, keep talking.' ... He's one of the most generous men I've ever met in my life, and it was truly an honor to serve under him as his

secretary and bookkeeper.”

Larry Taylor, receptionist at the St. John Center for the Diocese of Little Rock, graduated from Catholic High School with Msgr. Harris. The two have stayed in touch ever since.

“I’ve known Monsignor for a long time, since our days at Catholic High, and so enjoy his company,” Taylor said. “I recently hired a man to do some work for me, and he did a great job. When it came time to pay him, I told him that I was at the St. John’s Center and could be home in a matter of minutes. He exclaimed, ‘Do you know Father Jack? Is he there by any chance? He was so kind and helpful to me when I was on death row.’”

“He went on to say that Father Jack had been instrumental in his exoneration and return to being a productive member of society. My hunch is that this is just one of many, many wonderful stories about Father Jack.”

Today, Msgr. Harris’ work helps everyone — from parishioner to prisoner — to see God in all things.

“The people I worked with in crisis response and the people I worked with in prison — for them, the event, the crisis, the decision has already happened,” he said. “And now we’re looking for, where is God in all of this? Not beforehand. I don’t think he did any of that. He didn’t make that school shooting happen. He didn’t make any of those men that I work with commit their horrible crimes. He probably tried to stop it. Now we’ve got to try to find what he’s trying to do now.”