A year as archbishop: ‘I am very happy to be here’
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He may have been, he admits with a smile, “scared to death” when Pope Benedict XVI appointed him as the fifth archbishop of Los Angeles. But today --- nearly two years after his appointment was announced, and one year on the job --- Archbishop José H. Gomez declares, happily, “I am very happy to be here.”

The native of Monterrey, Mexico, who turned 60 last Dec. 26, has spent the past 21 months (including nine as coadjutor archbishop) getting acquainted with all that the archdiocese to offer, both the joys (“So many people are excited about learning about the faith”) as well as the frustrations (“The time you have to spend driving to get to places”).

He is happy with what he has seen of the local church --- “I think what is here, and what was here before I came, is really good” --- and if there is a need for change, it would be simply to strengthen and improve on what was in place when he succeeded Cardinal Roger Mahony a year ago this week.

On Feb. 27, Archbishop Gomez spent time with the Tidings discussing his first year as chief shepherd of the nation’s largest archdiocese. (Note: This article takes the place of Archbishop Gomez’ weekly column, which will return next week.)

Q: After one year --- actually, a year and nine months --- how has it gone for you?
A: I am very happy to be here in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. It has been a great blessing for me to be appointed as archbishop by the Holy Father; I understand it’s a big responsibility, but it’s just been wonderful. And so many wonderful things have happened in this first year, much more than I ever imagined.
It was at the beginning of Lent when I started, so one of the first things was the Rite of Election, as we had this past Sunday, a beautiful ceremony with so many people coming, a beautiful manifestation of faith. And it was a sign to me of how active people are in the parishes.

Q: What has surprised you, compared with expectations you might have had?
A: The first thing is the numbers of people (laughing). And right after the Rite of Election last March was the Religious Education Congress, and that was another eye opener for me, to see how people are excited about learning about the faith. I think that’s the surprising thing to me: how interested people are in the life of the church, wanting to learn more about the life of the church --- to see, for example, 16,000 young men and women at Congress’ Youth Day. What a beautiful reality.

One of my priorities since I became a bishop is helping Catholics to know the Catholic faith better, and I see in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles that Catholics are interested in knowing more about the faith, not just going to church on Sundays. Because our faith is much more than that.

Q: At the start of your time here, you listed five priorities: education in the faith, promoting vocations to the priesthood and religious life, proclaiming the beauty of our cultural diversity, promoting the sacredness of life, and defending the institutions of marriage and family. Have those priorities changed at all?
A: I think those priorities are still valid, and I think they are similar to priorities of the archdiocesan Synod --- the new evangelization, supporting the family, and so on. This past year, we had opportunity to talk about those in different ways. The Holy Father is starting a new Office of Evangelization at the Vatican, and has proclaimed this as a “year of faith.” All of that gives us opportunity bring more attention these priorities to the people of Los Angeles.

Q: Has education in the faith always been important to you as a priest?
A: Yes, because most of my ministry has been with laypeople. So I have seen throughout years of my priesthood how beautiful it is when people learn about the teachings of the church; they get excited about what they hear, because it is the truth. It brings them completion in the sense that they learn what it means to believe in God. They learn how it connects to each aspect of the human person, especially on who God is, the intimate relationship we can have with God.

So when we give them this --- teach them how to pray, use the Bible, how to enjoy the sacraments --- they discover the faith is not just going to church on Sunday; it’s a way of life. And I have seen it in young families, in young men and women discerning their vocation, in husbands and wives --- just a beautiful experience for me as a priest.

Q: Many who are not Catholic, and some who are, think of this faith as all about following a bunch of rules. How do we address that challenge?
A: I’m a priest of Second Vatican Council, and one of its main teachings was that every single person is called to holiness. And for that, you need to know your faith, know how to practice and live your faith. When you say, “We are the body of Christ,” it’s not just priests; it’s you, too. That’s a different understanding of who or what the Church is.

When I was growing up, many of us thought the real Catholics in the community were the priests and the nuns, and the rest of us were just hanging around. But when we say that each of us is called to holiness, it means each of us has the same responsibility of taking care of the Church, and the same call to be part of the Church.

But it is true that one of the biggest challenges I have is to make our faith attractive to people --- going from “a series of rules” to a positive way of living my life. People think, “How can I improve my life? Improve my finances, my education, my relationships?” Well, what really enhances your life is your spirituality, your relationship with God. Everything else comes from that.

Q: People coming into church leadership --- pastor, bishop, DRE, principal --- are often advised to wait six months or even a year before making changes. What’s your philosophy about making changes, especially after a year as archbishop? Is there a lot here that needs to be changed?

A: No. There’s the pastoral side and the administrative side of the archdiocese, and I think what is here, and what was here before I came, is really good. Obviously, as happens in life, we need to keep growing, finding new ways to minister to the people. So the change we may make is because people retire or there’s a new way to address a specific concern.

We did some restructuring of the Office for Clergy to strengthen it, and throughout the archdiocese we just want to strengthen what we have. In Catholic schools, for example, we want to strengthen our technology, and we’re looking for ways to support schools through technology. The same is true regarding the Catholic identity of schools, the formation of priests in the seminary and all of our ministries. I want to continue the ministry of Cardinal Mahony and the auxiliary bishops, but look to improve what we are doing.

I’m also active in promoting vocations. I’m very happy with St John’s Seminary and the formation that is taking place there. We’re trying to reach out to many more young men. And that’s another aspect that we hope to strengthen, to be more present to men and women who are interested in priestly or religious vocation or consecrated life.

Q: Regarding schools: Philadelphia is closing or consolidating some schools, as other dioceses have done in recent years. That hasn’t happened in Los Angeles, but there are certainly challenges. What are your plans or suggestions to maintain what we have, or even increase it?
A: Well my hope is we can grow the presence of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. I think it’s important to have a vision, that Catholic schools are important for the life of church and the life of society, because we train young men and women in the values of our faith that are essential for the future of our country.

Obviously there are challenges, financial and others, but we will always try to find ways in the archdiocese to embrace the concept of Catholic schools’ ministry, and to make it more effective, making sure that all elements necessary to increase this ministry are there.

It’s also important to adopt a positive attitude, that if the whole archdiocese is committed to Catholic schools, we will be successful. It’s important for all of us to value Catholic schools for educating our children, not just the parishes that have schools, and not just younger families that have kids.

Q: The ad limina visit of the Los Angeles bishops to Rome is coming soon (April 16). What expectations to you have for that visit?
A: We want to present to Holy Father the reality of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to the offices of the Holy See. My expectation is that the Holy See becomes more aware of how active, energetic and vibrant the Archdiocese of Los Angeles is. It will be a great opportunity for us to tell the Holy Father of our unity and fidelity to him, and listen to what he has to say.

Q: What have you not done yet, or would like to do more of, as archbishop?
A: Play basketball (laugh). This year gave me the opportunity to visit some parishes through confirmation and parish anniversaries, and to become aware of different ministries. My hope is to continue to do that and continue to be more present to people of the archdiocese. It’s a challenge because my calendar is rather busy, but I look forward to being out there more.

For us as bishops, our challenge is to balance our administrative and pastoral ministry. If it was up to me, I’d be in a parish every weekend.

Q: Have there been any disappointments or frustrations?
A: No, not really. Well, the freeways (laughing). The time you have to spend driving to get to places, it’s a challenge. In San Antonio, although it is a larger territory, going to the farthest location is two-and-a-half hours away. Here, sometimes you want to go a mile from where you are, and it takes a long time. So it’s different, and sometimes a frustration.

Q: What else impresses you about Los Angeles?
A: Another wonderful surprise to me has been the generosity of the people of the archdiocese, such as their support for Together In Mission. It’s unbelievable how generous people are in this archdiocese, for everything --- ministry, financial support to the poor, being active in public life.
I think of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Mass last December: You had 30,000 people coming to that; that is an investment on the part of people to take the time to go to Mass on Sunday outside their parish. It tells me how committed people are to the life of the Church, how important their faith is for them, to make the effort to be with other Catholics.

Q: You end all of your columns in The Tidings with a request to pray for the intercessions of our Blessed Mother. How long has your devotion to her been a part of your life?
A: Since I can remember (smiling). My parish in my youth was Our Lady of Lourdes, and when I went to Catholic schools, the brothers who were teachers had a strong devotion to the Blessed Mother. So I always had it.

As a teenager, I remember praying the rosary or asking our Blessed Mother for help on a specific issue. In college, I went to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City many times.

And I have had many opportunities in my priesthood to feel the protection of Mary, in all challenging situations as well as in joyful times. So I always try to finish my presentations with some mention of the Blessed Mother, because I think her example and praying for her intercession is essential to living a Christian life.

I would also add that I am grateful for the prayers of our people. I really feel the support of the people of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. I was scared to death before I came, and now I am very happy to be here.