

Catechist Congress inspires, informs religious educators

By Teresa A. Parsons
 "Humbly welcome the Word that has taken root in you" was the theme last weekend as more than 500 catechists from around the diocese gathered at Our Lady of Mercy High School. The occasion was the second Catechist Congress, sponsored by the diocesan Office of Religious Education.

Highlights of the congress included keynote speeches by Father John Aurelio, Maureen Gallagher and Bishop Matthew H. Clark, a concert with Mary Lu Walker, informational exhibits and a choice of more than 30 workshops.

Workshop topics ranged from teenage sexuality to religious education among Hispanics to using music, art and even the image of the clown as teaching tools in the classroom. Presenters also varied from parish directors and coordinators of religious education to diocesan staff and special guests, including Monsignor Joseph Champlin from the Diocese of Syracuse and Mary Reed Newland, a consultant on adult and family education from the Diocese of Albany.

In his address Friday night, Father John Aurelio focused on the introductory passage of the Gospel according to John, which states: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God..."

The word of God is simple to understand, Father Aurelio asserted. As proof, he pointed to the fact that God must be present to the simple person or the retarded person just as He is to the intellectual.

"It's incredible how people can take something so simple and make it so complicated," he said. "Everybody can understand God's word and everyone can learn from it if you allow it to touch your heart."

Envisioning the "word" John's gospel refers to as "Jesus," Father Aurelio said that God's utterance of it was a sign of love which began everything from the moment of

creation to eternity.

"God said 'Jesus' and the world happened," he explained. "That's the essence of what love is — the breath of life."

On a human level, he explained, finding ways to express love to one another makes people creative. "When a person utters a word with love, the expression of that word is creative," he said. "It makes things happen."

Asking each person in the audience to take a deep breath, he told them to hold it for 10 minutes. The auditorium erupted in laughter.

"That's the best example of love I know," he explained. "You must take it in in order to give it out. Love is not meant to be taken in and held onto. If you hold onto it, it will die, just like if you hold your breath, you will die."

"There's something very natural about breathing it (love) out," he added. "It's just too great to contain."

As love is freely given, so it must be freely returned, Father Aurelio contended. "We're so picky and choosy about who we give love back to ... but the more stingy you are, the less you get back — you become spiritually constipated."

Defining sin as "plugging up your ears to God's word," Father Aurelio said that as a result of Adam and Eve's original sin, we are all "hearing-impaired."

"We try to listen to God's word, but it comes in fuzzy ... and it's subject to misinterpretation," he said. Like a diamond, the word of God has many colors and facets, he noted, but there is still only one word.

"That word of God, spoken for all eternity, is hovering around us right now," Father Aurelio said. "One word, that's all it takes."

The chaplain of West Seneca Developmental Center, Father Aurelio is widely known for his work with mentally and physically disabled people, particularly

children. He has published several books, including "Story Sunday," "The Beggar's Christmas" and "Mosquitoes in Paradise." In 1983, he received the National Catholic Press Association Award for children and youth literature.

In the past, Father Aurelio, a priest of the Diocese of Buffalo, has served as a Catholic Charities social worker for dependent and neglected children and has worked with street gangs in New York City, Cuban refugees and migrant workers, among his other ministries.

Following Friday evening's address, Mary Lu Walker, a composer and performer from Corning, entertained the audience with selections from several of her albums. Currently, Walker is producing a children's television series called "Saints Alive" for the Archdiocese of New York. The series is scheduled for distribution on cable systems throughout the United States.

Highlighting Saturday morning's session were an address by Bishop Clark and the presentation of awards recognizing outstanding catechists.

Maureen Gallagher, the director of adult and family ministry for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, was the congress' closing speaker Saturday afternoon. She has written several books including "The Cathedral Book," "Praying with Scripture" and "Tell Me about God Catechism," and speaks frequently to groups around the country on such aspects of religious education as parent effectiveness training, communication skills and family education programs.

In her presentation, Gallagher stressed the need for Christians to believe in the holiness of their everyday life experiences.

"Our lives are full of religion, but we need to see it and feel it," she said. "We have a rich heritage of people gone before us who have found God in everyday experiences."

Gallagher named several influences that tend to undermine that belief: the special vocabulary that's often used to talk about religion; the elevation of saints and Biblical

figures above the realm of ordinary life; and the tendency for catechists and parents to undercut rather than support each other's efforts.

Using the examples of Mary Magdalen and Zacchaeus, she pointed out that Jesus was a healer of self concepts who always saw the good in people and affirmed it.

"Jesus challenged people in such a way that they felt good about themselves," she explained. "We're here basically because He had 11 good male friends and many good female friends. Whatever the relationship was between them, it was so exciting, they didn't want to let it die, and that's why we're here."

"Translating her theories into concrete suggestions for catechists, Gallagher urged her audience to be good listeners and to search for new images that reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary, the sacred in the secular."

"The greatest thing you can do is have kids and adults learn how to use their religious imaginations," she said. "If they've had that experience, it will change them ... once we've experienced something in our inner selves, you can't erase it or undo it."

One of the examples Gallagher offered was of a woman who had unexpected guests for dinner and had to find a way to stretch the meal so everyone was satisfied. "She identified with Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes because she said 'I did everything in my power to draw people together and to feed hungry people.'"

"We need to take a look at the scripture we write with our own lives," Gallagher concluded. "I believe our lives are as significant as the lives of the saints who have gone before ... and that they are supposed to affirm us in our struggles."

"Sometimes I get angry when I hear people say 'Oh he's a traditionalist,'" she added. "We all should be traditionalists. To be a traditionalist means to understand the root meaning of our traditions ... and that root meaning tells us that our lives are holy."

Mother Teresa urges NJ governor to OK shelter for unwed mothers

Trenton, N.J. (NC) — Mother Teresa of Calcutta has urged Gov. Thomas Kean of New Jersey to sign into law legislation that would permit shelters for unwed mothers and their children in private homes.

Mother Teresa made the comments in a letter delivered to the governor's office in Trenton. She wrote it during her visit to the United Nations in late October for the U.N.'s 40th anniversary ceremonies.

According to a spokesman, Kean had no plans to respond to the letter but would "take it into consideration when he gets around to making his decision."

The legislation, unanimously approved Sept. 15 by both houses of the New Jersey Legislature, was introduced after Kathy DiFiore of Ramsey, N.J., was fined \$10,000 for sheltering unwed mothers and their children. DiFiore, a Rochester native, was


charged with running an illegal boarding house, although she did not charge rent.

Adolph Schimpf, president of the New Jersey Right to Life Committee, said he was "thrilled this world-renowned and compassionate humanitarian would take time out of her busy schedule to personally write to the governor." Schimpf said he was "shocked" Kean "apparently ignored the plea."

The right-to-life committee has joined with other pro-life groups to protest what they see as the governor's delay in signing the bill.

Kean has to act on the bill by Nov. 15. Schimpf said Kean "seemed more interested in protecting his bureaucracy than protecting infants and their mothers."

Critics of the bill have said it could lessen the authority of state agencies that control child care and govern boarding homes and provide a loophole for abuses in both areas.



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