

Features

Record number of local youths to attend conference

By Teresa A. Parsons

A ventriloquist priest, the Brady Bunch's housekeeper, a stand-up comedian, and an advocate for homeless people will be the featured speakers next week when more than 3,000 youths and youth ministers from across the eastern United States gather in Pittsburgh, Pa., for the National Catholic Youth Conference.

Drawn by that offbeat mix of speakers, more than 30 workshops, and a slew of special activities, 56 representatives from the Diocese of Rochester will attend the conference November 12-15.

The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry sponsors two such conferences every other year on the East and West Coasts respectively. The theme of this year's gathering is "Love is Our Shelter; Together We Build."

The 45 teenagers and 11 chaperones who will travel by bus from Rochester to Pittsburgh are twice as large a group as has participated in previous years. Pat Fox, diocesan director of Youth Ministry, credits the conference's convenient location in part for the increase. But he also believes that previous conferences have sold themselves. "Kids have come back and told other kids, 'This is something worthwhile to go to,'" he said.

Joe Eller, a member of St. John's/St. Cecilia's Parish youth group in Elmira, has been one of the conference's best salesmen. When he attended the most recent youth conference two years ago in Biloxi, Miss., Eller was most impressed by the family atmosphere among participants. "It's something you learn a lot from — maybe not directly, but indirectly," he said. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

Since returning, the 16-year-old has so excited the interest of his fellow youth-group members that more than a dozen plan to attend the event this year, along with an almost equal number of chaperones — the largest group from any one diocesan parish. Members managed to raise the nearly \$4,000 they needed for registration fees by taking up a parish collection every week for the past two years.

Ten teenagers from St. Joseph's Parish in Rush washed cars, sold candy and "did anything else they could think of" to pay their way to Pittsburgh, according to Erin Bock, coordinator of the parish youth group.

Bock, who also works on the diocesan youth ministry office staff, is another recruiter who came by her enthusiasm through experience. She has attended two previous youth conferences in Biloxi, Miss., and Washington, D.C. In addition, she served from 1984-86 on the National Youth Council, which plans the conferences. "They energized me and gave me a sense of hope that there are other young people out there interested in the Church and the mission of the Church," she recalled.

The fact that 14 teenagers plan the agendas on behalf of their peers also accounts in part for the conferences' appeal. Members of the planning council try to include speakers and activities that appeal to young people, Bock explained. "The big names are what draws people, but (organizers) also look for people who have a sense of Church and of what kids are interested in, and who have some good values and something to say," she said.

This year's slate of keynote speakers may initially seem somewhat zany, but the biographical sketches that accompany the conference program indicate that each speaker has a serious side as well. The ventriloquist priest is Father Chris Woerz, a Salesian priest from Rosemead, Calif., who uses comedy and his dummy, Linus the Lizard, as vehicles for discussing Christian service and outreach. Former police officer Michael Pritchard is a San Francisco comedian whose jokes likewise carry a message about the need to care for others.

Ann B. Davis, perhaps better known as "Alice," the wisecracking housekeeper on television's "The Brady Bunch," is offscreen a member of a Christian community in Denver. In her address to the conference, she plans to

describe her experience of living as a Christian in "the real world" and her struggle to discern a religious vocation.

Michael Stoops has worked with homeless people in Portland, Ore., for 15 years. Last winter, he lived on the streets of Washington, D.C., to advocate for the homeless.

The three-day conference will also offer more than 30 workshops on topics ranging from "Sports in Christ's image: Jesus was not a jock" to "How to raise your parents" and "What do you do with a friend in crisis?" Among other special events will be multicultural liturgies, a concert by Christian composer and musician Jerry Goebel, and a "dress up/sit down" dinner.

Symphonic unity, not unison

TRUTH IS SYMPHONIC
Aspects of Cultural Pluralism
By Hans Urs von Balthasar
Translated by Graham Harrison
206 pp. San Francisco
Ignatius Press \$9.95

By Dominic A. Aquila

A pluralistic Church, as it is defined in today's discourse among Catholics, refers to a Church whose members are free to adopt Church teachings that are congenial to their cultural experience and reject teachings that are not.

So, for example, because Americans have always found authority — legitimate or not — to be problematic, by this theory they have solid cultural grounds for questioning the teaching authority of the Holy Father. Under this wrong-headed view of Christian pluralism, the particular character and demands of one part of the Church undermine the universality and hence the integrity of the Church as Christ's continuing presence in the world.

Genuine Christian pluralism, according to German theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, holds fast to the unity of the universal Church — the body of Christ — and celebrates the infinite multiplicity and integrity of the Church's complementary parts or ministries.

The symphony metaphor around which von Balthasar constructs his argument provides a brilliant illustration of the point. "Symphony, means 'sounding together,'" the theologian writes. "First there is one sound, then different sounds, and then the different sounds sing together in a dance of sound . . . Each (instrument) keeps its utterly distinctive timbre, and the composer must write for each part in such a way that this timbre achieves its fullest effect." None of this however implies that symphonic harmonies are sickly sweet; great music uses tension or dissonance — not cacophony — for its drama.

In this metaphor lies the heart and logic of von Balthasar's concept of Christian pluralism. First there is Christ — pure, undifferentiated sound — who animates His Church on earth through the Holy Spirit. Next, the members of the Church are introduced — "different sounds singing together." Though part of the Church, each member is given great respect and every opportunity to fully express his uniqueness, bringing out the singular timbres

Between the Lines

of the individual instruments. Finally through Christ, God — the composer — shapes each person's part in the Church according to that person's capabilities and measure of faith — the inherent timbre of the instrument.

In the life of the Church, this metaphor becomes concrete in the priest's understanding that he "needs the Carmelite nun who prays and does penance for him in seclusion. He also needs the layman, who, with his own competence, puts into practice in the world the Christian attitude that the priest endeavors to mediate to him."

For his part, the layman with a family understands that he cannot perform acts of civil disobedience to Church rule; this really must be performed by the Church's prophets. Mother Teresa understands her work in Calcutta to be quite different from Abbe Monchanin's work in the same country. In short, each part assents to the words of St. Paul: "For the body does not consist of one member but of many . . . If all were a single organ, where would the body be?" (1 Corinthians 12:14, 19)

Truth Is Symphonic, offers us in readable and eloquent prose a fresh understanding of pluralism and many other related mysteries of the Church. Even more importantly, it makes a solid contribution to the current debate on pluralism — a debate that became awfully noisy during Pope John Paul II's September visit here, but failed to be informative. Von Balthasar bursts through the debate's uninformative and misapplied categories of liberal and conservative to give us clear standards for judging between genuine and false conceptions of Christian pluralism. By doing so he checks the arrogance of those, who in the very name of toleration, would have not symphony, but deadening unison.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Aquila's book reviews will appear monthly in the *Courier-Journal*.

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