

## Features



Bonnie Trafolet/Courier-Journal

Maria Sanchez, 13, concentrates on her homework and blowing bubbles when the St. Michael's Parish youth group gets together for a study session during the week.

## Workshops spur renewed hope for youth ministers

By Richard A. Kiley

Although they came from different areas of the diocese, volunteers and professionals who gathered at the Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua earlier this month all had one goal in mind: to revitalize adolescents' interest in high school religious education.

Brother Floyd Warwick, a former diocesan director of youth ministry in Newark, New Jersey, conducted the two-day workshop December 4 and 5 to aid adolescent-catechesis leaders who are struggling to keep high school students active in religious education after confirmation.

Brother Warwick, who now teaches religion at a Baltimore high school, based the workshop entirely on a 1986 paper, "The Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis: Maturing in Faith." The document was published by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, in collaboration with several other national organizations.

During the two days, Brother Warwick, 54, challenged parish youth ministers and catechetical leaders to find a common denominator with their students, as they try to revive interest in religious education among older adolescents.

"The chief thing to be concerned about is that there is somewhere to go with what you're doing," said Brother Warwick. "You have to present material in a 'we're all in it together' kind of way."

Brother Warwick added that it's the responsibility of catechetical leaders and youth ministers to promote critical learning among adolescents as the youths experience the life-long journey of catechesis.

"If I could teach my kids to learn critically, the rest wouldn't matter," Brother Warwick said. "You've got to get (lessons) pared down to where it is challenging and thought-provoking for kids, but you've got to make sure it's in the ballpark of the student's awareness as well."

Brother Warwick also promoted the impor-



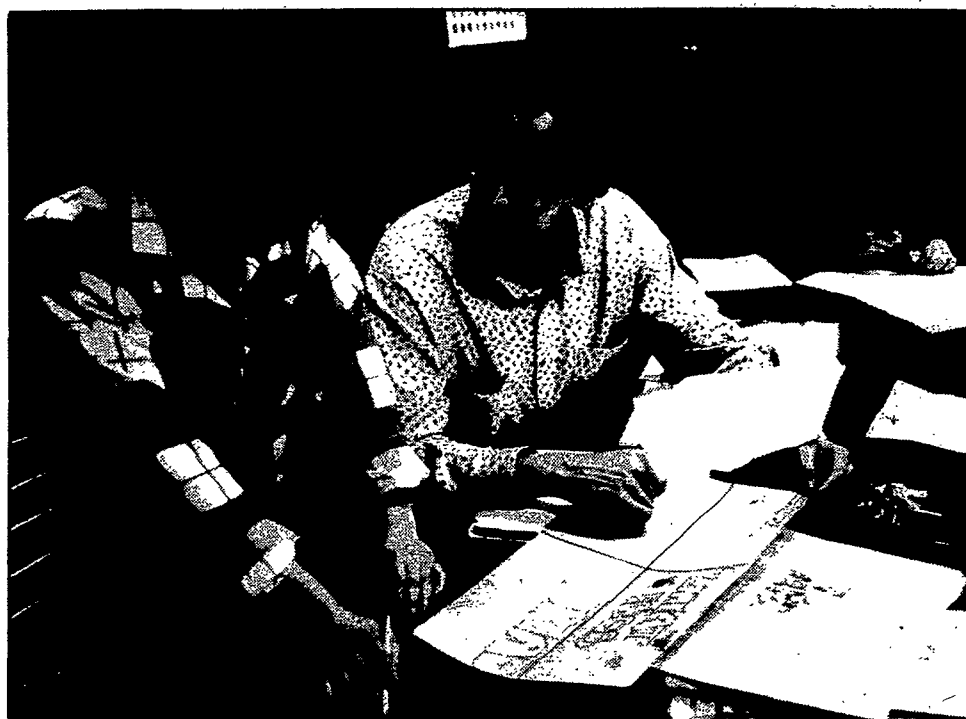
Gloria Garcia helps out another student with mathematics equations at the chalkboard.

tance of projects for younger students. "The Christmas pageant and the May procession are excellent ideas; a lot of people don't realize that the first through seventh grades are the most important (times ... faith)."

He said that instructors must also delve into issues involving the relationship between teens and their parents. "We showed the movie 'The Breakfast Club' and although some parents objected to some of the profanity, (the showing of the film) was a success because it really got into parent-teen relationships," Brother Warwick said.

Ann Wilkin, who has recently become involved in the religious education program at St. Lawrence Parish after moving from Grand Island, NY, said she'll use the workshop to breathe new life into the high school religious education program at the Greece parish.

"I agree with emphasizing social-service projects rather than running a structured class," said Wilkin, who added that the Greece par-



St. Michael's Youth Group Director Rudy Rivera goes over a homework problem with Maria Sanchez (left).

ish still has a healthy religious education program through the eighth grade. "Shoving doctrine down their throats is not the way to do it."

Wilkin added that attention to youth ministry was one of the main goals set forth by the parish council at St. Lawrence this year, so adolescents wouldn't "hang out some place else instead of church."

"(Religious educators) do tend to overload young people with theology," said Sister Patricia Flass, SSJ, religious education coordinator at St. Mary's Parish in Corning. "We need better approaches to religious education."

Sister Flass said the rejuvenation of St. Mary's religious education program will take more preparation on the part of professionals and volunteers as well.

"I think we have to begin preparing teachers sooner; we've got to get them together in the summertime or in May or June — after the school year ends," Sister Flass said.

Sister Flass, who served as a teacher at DeSales High School and principal at Blessed Sacrament Junior High before arriving at St. Mary's, added that great interest exists among the adult community in efforts to turn the parish's high school program around. Hopefully, she said, that interest will rub off on teens.

"It's not that adults aren't willing — people are there to be the teachers — it's getting the young interested in the program that takes work."

Gary LaLonde, director of religious education at St. Mary's in Auburn, said the workshops renewed his enthusiasm in getting high school adolescents to stay on in his program after confirmation.

"I've got a new zest for doing a good job," LaLonde said. "It's going to take a constant building process to rebuild the program; we have to stir up the young-adult population and workshops like this show us how to do that."