

Features

Thanks Giving Appeal '88

Retreats offer young adults, youth a fresh look at faith

By Rob Cullivan

Leave it to youth ministry to find creative, painless means for teaching the value of cooperation — like demanding ransom for a raisin, for example.

The shriveled grape had been jokingly adopted as a mascot by a group of participants at the Catholic Youth Leadership Institute's weeklong retreat last June at Camp Stella Maris. When the institute's co-directors, Anne Wegman and Laurie Orman, kidnapped the "mascot" and held it for ransom, small-group facilitator Mary Randall managed to turn the prank into an exercise in group cohesion. "It sharpened and honed (participants') leadership skills," she said.

Using the techniques they had learned about dividing tasks to achieve a common goal, Randall's group set off in pairs to obtain portions of the ransom — such as an unused toothbrush or a can of potato chips. Through all the silliness, the students learned how to cooperate.

That's one of the many goals of the institute, which the diocese established to teach leadership skills to students in grades eight to 12. Sixty-seven teenagers from youth ministry programs throughout the diocese attended this year's institute, which was staffed by nine adults and nine students working as junior staff members. Throughout the week of prayer and discussion, participants learned skills ranging from achieving group consensus to handling decisions that reflect a large number of viewpoints.

Patrick Van Durme, attended the first institute session in 1980. Now, in his work as director of youth ministry for Corning and Painted Post, he frequently uses the skills he learned at the institute and in subsequent workshops.

But he didn't have to wait until he began his professional career to put the institute's lessons into action. As a member of his parish youth group at St. Mary's in Dansville in the early '80s, Van Durme used group-consensus tech-

niques to forge a compromise between parents and teens who disagreed about the hours of a parish youth center.

One faction, Van Durme recalled, wanted the center to be open from 6:30-9 p.m. for fifth- through 12th-graders, while another group wanted it open only to high school students from 8 to 11 p.m. Van Durme persuaded both sides to give a little, and they eventually agreed to keep the center open from 6:30-10 p.m. for eighth- to 12th-graders.

One of the institute's most recent alumni, Susan Eikel of the youth group at Holy Name of Jesus Church in Greece, said this year's institute taught her how to listen more effectively. In one learning activity, students were paired off, one blindfolded and one sitting on his or her hands, and told to talk to each other.

"I learned that hearing is more than just using your ears," Eikel remarked. Blindfolded, she couldn't tell whether her partner was listening. "I understand much more how important it is to look at the person you're talking to," she said.

Talking and listening make up much of what goes on at the various retreats sponsored by the diocesan Department of Youth Ministry. Eleventh- and 12th-graders participate in Teen Seminar, and seniors who have attended Teen Seminar may then participate in Emmaus, which runs from Holy Thursday to Holy Saturday before Easter of each year. All retreats are given at the Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua and take place on weekdays.

Other retreats are innovative combinations of spirituality and practical recognition of student interests. One such retreat is Pray and Ski Day at Bristol. Participants ski at Bristol Mountain during the day and spend the evenings reflecting on spiritual concerns, according to Father Charles Manning, diocesan director of teen retreats and Christian Family Renewal.



Participants in last June's Catholic Youth Leadership Institute spent a week getting to know each other and themselves.

Father Manning said that while the retreats are continually being updated to reflect the trends and issues that affect each new generation of teens, one theme remains constant in their lives. "Family and friends are the two biggest values important to kids in light of their relationship to their Lord," he said.

Many of today's teenagers believe in God, but are hurting because of divorce, alcoholism in the family, or the confusing messages sent by the entertainment world, Father Manning commented, noting that the three "gods" of youthful lives are academia, sports and success. "The kids are busier than ever before," he said. "It's tough getting them out of school to make a retreat."

The diocesan Young Adult retreat program, meanwhile, offers Antioch and Kyrie programs for adults between the ages of 18 and 35. Highland Agnello, a student at Rochester Institute of Technology, is one of scores of young adults who have attended the Antioch retreats since they began a decade ago. The retreats take place four times a year from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon at different locations throughout the diocese. Sixteen to 20 staff members work with about 40 participants each time.

Agnello attended the Antioch retreat just to get away from the everyday distractions that can keep her mind off God. "I wanted to acknowledge that (God) is important in my life," she said.

The retreats have a two-fold purpose, according to Maggie Cappadonia, co-

chairwoman of the Antioch program. Through small group discussions, participants try to gain self-knowledge as Christians. The retreat offers a short course in basic Christianity, especially at it can be lived in the everyday world. Discussion topics range from life in the community to the sacraments, and cover such areas as security, motivation and unity in the Christian life.

Cappadonia commented that the two retreats in October and June tend to draw a variety of young adults — both single and married, professional and blue collar. The winter retreat and one before Easter attract a large number of college students.

Not everybody may find the retreats to their liking, Cappadonia noted. Those who find Antioch's numerous talks and highly structured program confining might wish to consider Kyrie, the newest young adult retreat being offered by the diocese at the next session, scheduled for April, 1989.

The first Kyrie was given last March at St. Mary's of the Lake in Ontario. In an effort to develop a more leisurely atmosphere for reflection, the retreat encompasses only four talks over a weekend as opposed to Antioch's dozen, according to Randall, who serves as program chairwoman. Each presentation is followed by one hour of personal reflection, after which candidates return to reflect together in a group setting.

The rest of the weekend, candidates are free to meditate and meet with each other on their own. "It's very individualistic," Randall said.

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