

Teen in Owego promotes faith among peers

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

OWEGO — If Melissa Laubach stood up and talked to her peers at St. Patrick's Church, she said she would speak about morals.

"Morals represent your beliefs and what you should be doing," said the senior at Owego Free Academy. "Until you know your morals and go by what you believe, nothing is going to change. You have to know yourself before you can help anyone else."

The 18-year-old Catholic exemplifies youths' involvement in the church and the idealistic visions they have for the future church. In addition to her responsibilities as peer minister and youth-group leader, Melissa has already begun planning for that future by preparing younger members of the parish to serve in the church.

As one of the two youths on St. Patrick's parish council, Melissa said she joined the council when she began thinking about how high school students could be more helpful in the church.

In the spring of 1990, Melissa learned that her pastor, Father William G. Darling, needed help in coordinating several parish projects. The priest, a member of the Army reserves, was preparing for possible departure to Saudi Arabia to serve in the Persian Gulf war.

She approached Father Darling with the concept of having high school students train younger children to be altar servers. Melissa noted that, at the time, she didn't realize the size of the task she was undertaking.

Last spring, Melissa held a three-hour training session to prepare about 50 youths for altar service. Although she received some support from fellow youth-group members, Melissa said she essentially ran the program on her own.

For the past year, Melissa has been responsible for the scheduling and monitoring of altar servers. She said she contacts all the servers to check on their progress or help with any problems.

In addition, as a member of the parish council, Melissa said

she has been given the chance to see the inner workings of the church. Although she is young, Melissa said she already has some ideas of things she would like to change.

"I would like them (adults) to listen more to what teens have to say," said Melissa, one of the youths to receive a Hand of Christ Award in April. "We are the ones who are going to be here for the rest of our lives and they are not."

Melissa added that she would like to see women have a greater role in today's church. She also thinks women should be able to become priests.

"I think women as priests would be great. I don't think we get enough credit," explained Melissa, who remembered how infuriated she became years ago when she couldn't serve at the altar with her younger brother.

"Women have as good a faith as men do, and I think they could deliver as good a message as men," she added.

The daughter of Joan and James Laubach, the Owego teen said she also would like to see more of her peers become involved with the church. She said that peer pressure keeps many youths from getting involved with the church for fear of being perceived as "uncool."

"They think they have to go against peer pressure and the 'in' crowd," noted Melissa. As the homecoming queen selection at both Owego Free Academy and the New York State competition, Melissa has proven that a person can be popular and faith-filled.

She acknowledged that her friends don't pressure her because they realize she won't change her beliefs.

"Once I have something set, I follow it and that's just the way I am. They know they can't influence me in that way," said Melissa.

Father Darling affirmed Melissa's commitment to her beliefs. "I think her confirmation is something she has been living out," the priest said.

He also acknowledged her talents in welcoming her peers into the church.

"She has done a lot to promote the faith without being overly religious. In natural ways she has used her talents to say, 'This is important,'" noted the Owego pastor. "She is a witness — inside and outside of the church — of many values."

The priest added, "She does demonstrate to me a good representation of the future — in 1991 and right here in our own backyard."

Melissa is excited about embarking on her future after graduation. She plans to attend Broome Community College in the fall to study nursing. Always eager to help others, she is preparing for a career as an emergency rescue flight nurse.

Despite the many choices and distractions that face Melissa at this time in her life, she said her faith gives her the strength she needs to get through difficult times. She said it has helped increase her self-esteem and her confidence, too.

"I think God guides me in my decisions and has helped me in some difficult situations," she acknowledged.

Many doors are opening for the Owego teen, who said she plans to keep the door to her faith always open.

"My faith will always grow because it can always be bigger than it is," she concluded.



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Melissa Laubach, a parishioner of St. Patrick's Church in Owego, is an active member of the church's parish council and youth group. The senior at Owego Free Academy has also initiated a program to train young altar servers.

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