

Youths tackle issues at national conference

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — A weekend bus trip with a bunch of fellow teens sounds like a pretty good time.

But fun was far from the only objective of 108 diocesan youths who traveled to Indianapolis for the 21st National Catholic Youth Congress, Nov. 7-10.

That contingent met with roughly 5,300 other teenagers and 1,600 youth ministers in what Father Leonard Wenke, executive director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, called "the largest gathering of Catholic youth in the last 10 years."

The top priority for this gathering, which takes place every two years, is to tackle some of the tough issues facing society today, and to develop belief and action strategies for Catholic teens nationwide. The theme of this year's conference was "Peace of the Puzzle."

Guest speakers were Olympic runner Madeline Manning Mims and guitarist Tony Melendez.

Mims, who won a gold medalist in the half-mile at the 1968 games, served in 1988 as served as chaplain for English-speaking Olympic teams. Melendez, who was born with no arms, plays

guitar with his feet. Melendez gained national attention in 1987 when he performed during Pope John Paul II's visit to Los Angeles.

During the first two days of the conference, a pair of Rochester teens took part in a separate meeting known as the National Catholic Youth Congress.

Representing the diocese were Jill Miller, 17, of Holy Name of Jesus Church in Greece; and Anthony Archbald, 15, of Our Lady of Lourdes in Brighton. The two teens also are youth representatives to the Diocesan Pastoral Council.

Miller and Archbald joined 20 U.S. bishops and 298 other teen delegates from 114 dioceses for group discussions on the topics of racism, sexuality and substance abuse.

Miller, who participated in a discussion of substance abuse, found the small-group experience rewarding.

"I went in with the attitude that I wasn't too excited because I was getting separated from my friends (at the conference). It was kind of like being in your freshman year, when you don't know anyone," said Miller, a senior at Greece Olympia High School.

"But at my table, everybody was so friendly and had so much to share. I'm not normally exposed to drug abuse,



Jill Miller was one of the two participants representing the Rochester diocese at the National Catholic Youth Congress held Nov. 7-10 in Indianapolis, Ind.

but it had really hit home to a couple of people in my group. I really got close to some people."

Archbald, a junior at McQuaid Jesuit High School, was in a group that dealt with racism. One point in the discussion stood out in his mind.

He recalled that one of the participants — a white girl — told the group her mother would throw her out of the house if she brought home someone of a different race.

"That really hit home to me," said Archbald, who is black.

"At first I was mad. I wanted to start screaming and yelling at her," he said. "But then I better understood her point of view — that she was scared of getting kicked out of the house."

By the end of the session, Archbald reported, group members came up with a statement: "Racism is a learned ignorance."

Patrick Fox, the Diocese of Rochester's director of Youth Ministry, served as a facilitator for one group discussing substance abuse. He noted that the event brought together kids from all over the United States.

"In some cases you had kids who really hadn't seen people of color before," Fox noted. "There's not a whole lot of black folk and Spanish folk

around the hills of South Dakota."

The most timely subject discussed at the conference was sexuality: Its first day coincided with basketball star Magic Johnson's revelation that he had tested HIV-positive.

"The young people said this news reinforced for them the sense that if one lives out Catholic teaching and values, (such tragedies) would not occur," said Bishop Michael J. Sheehan of Lubbock, Texas.

Following the congress, Miller, Archbald and their peers returned to the larger youth gathering for its final two days. Friday evening's program included a Mass for teens in Region 2, which covers the eight dioceses in New York state. Workshops took place Saturday morning, and the rest of that day was open for leisure activities.

Concluding the weekend was a Sunday morning Mass in the Indianapolis Convention Center for the entire 7,000-person congress.

"The whole weekend was a great time," said Miller.

Archbald voiced similar feelings, saying, "It was just wild — I can't describe it."

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Anthony Archbald, a McQuaid Jesuit High School student, came out of the conference with the realization that "racism is a learned ignorance."

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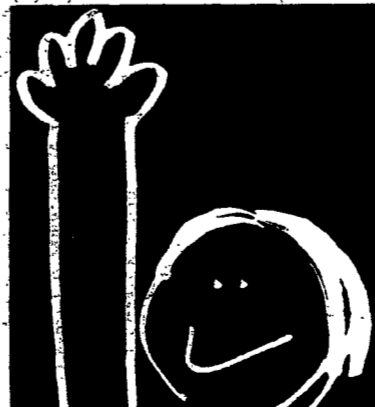
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