

Bishop's Day workshop on cults proves popular

Tragedy in Waco provokes interest

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — People attending these workshops would probably have been taken aback if they'd been told that they may soon become a top priority for cult recruiters.

After all, this was Bishop's Day with Youth, an annual daylong event in which diocesan teenagers convene to celebrate their Catholic faith.

Yet Patrick Fox, who conducted two one-hour sessions dealing with cults and Satanism, emphasized that cults often target young adults when increasing membership.

"I think most kids are not aware that they're vulnerable," remarked Fox, who serves as youth minister at St. John the Evangelist Church, 150 Floverton St.

"Bright, alert, somewhat articulate people — they can become the prime targets," said Fox in an interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "The cults target people going through life transition times, especially when they're away from the family: freshman and sophomore years at college, the first year out of college."

The cult/Satanism workshops proved to be the most heavily attended of the nearly 20 workshops offered during Bishop's Day with Youth, which was held this past Sunday, April 25, at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center, 123 E. Main St.

Nearly 300 of the 1,300 Bishop's Day participants listened to Fox explain some of the common tendencies among cults.

The chief selling point of these groups, Fox said, is that you will overcome all your problems through the love and support of fellow members.

On college campuses, for instance, cult members seek out students who appear to be longing for companionship, and invite them to some sort of social event.

"They look for a person who wants to be part of a group but who has trouble making friends independently," Fox said.

Then, through a gradual mind-manipulation process which leans heavily on biblical passages, new members are convinced to give their complete devotion to an established leader. These followers eventually hand over their entire earnings, and their actions and conversations become almost exclusively cult related.

"You cannot engage a cult member in a logical argument. It's futile," Fox commented.

The youth minister described a cult leader as "an insecure person who wants people to follow him, but doesn't feel it's possible without some kind of coercion."

Devotion to a leader can be so thorough that disciples might even risk their lives, as the April 19 tragedy at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, illustrated. Leader David Koresh, along with 85 followers, apparently burned to death after a 51-day standoff with federal officials.

Fox also emphasized to the teens that once you've joined a cult, it becomes extremely difficult to leave. "In a cult, you don't make choices," Fox said.

For instance, several of the more than 900 People's Temple members



Patrick Fox (far left) discusses cults and Satanism with youths during a workshop at Bishop's Day with Youth, which was held at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center on April 25.

who died in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 were either shot or injected with poison after apparently refusing to comply with the Rev. Jim Jones' suicide command.

Despite the tragedies in Waco and Jonestown, Fox admitted that Branch Davidians, devil worshipers and other types of cults have as much constitutional legitimacy as the Roman Catholic Church.

"The big debate about Waco is, was it a cult of a psychologically disturbed person, or was this really a group of people who believed in their own way of life and just wanted to be left alone?" Fox queried.

While people such as David Koresh,

Jim Jones and Charles Manson have made headlines for infusing violence into their cult-related events, cult activities are generally peaceful. This came as news to one workshop participant.

"I was surprised that there isn't all the blood and killing everybody. It's kind of more quiet," said 15-year-old Kelly Shaffer, a parishioner at St. Patrick Church, 46 Stanley St., Mt. Morris.

When asked how she would respond if approached by a cult member, Shaffer remarked: "I'd say that I was a Catholic and I was happy in my religion."

Yet, after hearing of cult groups' techniques, Shaffer isn't sure that she

could even detect when a cult member was attempting to recruit her.

"I don't think so, at first, but I would hope I would," said the Mount Morris Central High School sophomore.

Fox suggested the possibility that Catholics may even be at greater risk to cults than people of other faiths.

"Roman Catholic youths are vulnerable because they don't have a deep ownership of their faith. So often it's been presented that they should just sit and listen and take (church teachings) in, instead of giving them the space to develop their ownership. I say that telling isn't teaching," Fox commented.

Programs offered

ROCHESTER — Family Service of Rochester, 30 Clinton Ave. N., has started two youth programs that address problems stemming from substance abuse.

Chemical Abuse Prevention Group (CAP) is geared for children, ages 6-12, who come from a family in which substance abuse exists.

Teen Abuse Group (TAG) is designed for youths, ages 13-18, who are already involved in substance abuse.

For details on these programs, call 716/232-1840.

Dance marathon May 8-9

PITTSFORD — Youth groups are invited to participate in a dance marathon scheduled for May 8-9 at St. Louis Church, 60 S. Main St.

The event will begin at 9 p.m. on May 8 and run through noon May 9.

Entry and sponsorship information can be obtained by calling Carmen Quinones at 716/381-4455.

Proceeds from the marathon will be used to support St. Louis' sister parish of St. Bridget, 175 St. Bridget's Drive, Rochester.

Camp volunteers sought

PENFIELD — Cancer Action Inc. is seeking teen-age and adult volunteers for its 12th annual Camp Open Arms summer program.

This year's camp will take place July 6-16 at Cobles Elementary School, 140 Gebhardt Road. The day camp provides recreational activities for young cancer victims and their siblings.

To obtain a volunteer registration form, or to make a donation of cash or merchandise to Camp Open Arms, call 716/423-9700.



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