

Retreats help teenagers grow closer to Christ

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

CANANDAIGUA — This retreat included much more than silent prayer, as evidenced by the popcorn-strewn floors at Notre Dame Retreat House.

Fun was mixed in with deep reflection for the high-school juniors and seniors attending an "Encountering Christ" retreat, which took place Feb. 20-22.

Forty-three youths, along with eight adults, attended the event in the retreat house located high above Canandaigua Lake's northwestern shores.

The three-day retreat was marked by recreational activities such as an "animal-sound" game. These were complemented by an extensive series of peer talks and small-group discussions. Other highlights included a reconciliation service on Feb. 21, and a closing liturgy the following day.

Both the "Encountering Christ" and "Awakening Faith" retreats — a similar event for teenagers in grades 9-10 — were implemented last year and are offered at various locations across the Rochester diocese.

According to Michael Theisen, diocesan youth coordinator, the retreats are growing quickly in popularity. Theisen noted that three "Encountering Christ" sessions are planned for 1995, compared to two this year and one in 1993. A similar rise is occurring for "Awakening Faith" retreats: four are slated for 1995, with three in 1994 and two last year.

"The response has at least tripled," Theisen said. The retreats' greatest asset, Theisen remarked, is that teens can talk freely about their Catholic faith without being subjected to peer pressure.

"They see that prayer is acceptable and talking about God is OK — it's cool," Theisen commented.

Father David W. Mura, who serves as pastor of Holy Apostles Church in Rochester, agreed that the "Awakening Faith" and "Encountering Christ" retreats are effective because of their specialized approaches toward those who attend.

"They try to give the kids the experience of Catholic Christianity in their own language," said Father Mura, who has led several past diocesan youth retreats and assisted at the recent gathering in Canandaigua.

"The formats change, but the spirit is basically the same," the priest added.

Andrea Record, who served as coordinator of the Canandaigua retreat, noted that these events are designed to have a lasting effect after participants return to their respective parishes.

She said that teens are asked to write letters to their parish's youth minister or pastor, stating how they can pass their retreat experience on to parishioners.

"That's the challenge — how do you share this with someone who wasn't here? (By writing letters), they're a little more obligated to follow through," remarked Record, the youth minister at St. Dominic Church in Shortsville.

Although Record acknowledged that the message these participants carry forth may not change the world, "even a subtle change can have a ripple effect. It becomes contagious," she said.

For 18-year-old Matt Moran, a parishioner at the cluster comprising St. Ann Church in Palmyra and St. Gregory Church in Marion, the retreat does an excellent job of serving its basic intention — to encounter Christ.

"I love being there with other people, helping them get the most out of their experience. You can see it in their eyes," said Moran, who delivered a talk about forgiveness during the three-day gathering.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Clockwise from top: Youths taking part in a Feb. 20-22 'Encountering Christ' retreat at the Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua take the time to create a symbol representing their group. The symbol was used on a poster which was displayed in the chapel during the final Mass Feb. 22; Father David W. Mura, pastor of Rochester's Holy Apostles Church, served as a spiritual leader for the teens and celebrated the concluding Mass; Nadine Girard of St. Agnes Church in Avon writes a message on an affirmation board to Charles Kellett of St. Mary Our Lady of the Hills Church in Honeoye.

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