

YOUTH
FEATURE

Companions on the Journey



Teens form lasting ties at diocesan convention



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Paul Nagy, a parishioner at Hamlin's St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church, listens to Steve Angrisano's musical messages.

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

GENESEO — "Is there such a thing as good peer pressure?" Bishop Matthew H. Clark pondered.

His ears were blistered by a thunderous "yes" from the pack of teenagers who had just experienced a weekend jammed with love and spirituality.

This was the kind of peer pressure that works in a positive way. The kind that can dissolve skittishness in wary youths, and transform them into outgoing people full of hugs and friendly chatter — in just three days.

Such was the intensity behind the first-ever Diocesan Youth Convention, held Aug. 5-7 at the State University of New York College at Geneseo. As closing ceremonies took place this past Sunday, the Student Union auditorium was engulfed with teens exchanging phone numbers, signing each other's T-shirts, and — in a few instances — sobbing in each other's arms.

Three conventioners from nearby parishes in the Genesee Valley region can vouch for the event's social and spiritual impact.

"I met tons of people. I knew no one when I got here," remarked Laurie Phillips, 14, a parishioner at Sacred Heart Church in Perkinsville.

"I feel like I've known (the other participants) forever. This opened up a whole new world to me," added Tara

Anzalone, 15, a parishioner in the cluster consisting of St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Leicester and St. Lucy Church in Retsof.

"I'm so glad I came. I was really hesitant," said Hannah Delles, 15, a parishioner at St. Agnes Church in Avon.

The event drew 367 high-school students from across the diocese — 298 of whom stayed from Friday night through Sunday afternoon. The other 69 attended the convention's day program held Saturday, Aug. 6.

Meaningful music

One of the event's highlights was the participation of Steve Angrisano, a speaker/singer/guitarist from Dallas. Angrisano was already familiar to some of the convention participants due to his performances at World Youth Day in Denver last summer and at the National Catholic Youth Convention in Philadelphia in the fall.

All weekend long, Angrisano deftly combined festive participation songs with strong, moving testimony about the importance of striving to become more Christ-like.

"We've wasted our time if you go home and nothing changes for you," Angrisano said during a late-night gathering on Saturday.

Michael Theisen, diocesan coordinator for youth ministry, noted that Angrisano's dynamic performances served as the glue that held the convention to-

gether.

"Steve Angrisano was the perfect keynote speaker," said Theisen.

Down to business

Much of the convention involved thought-provoking activities in classrooms and dormitories.

On Saturday, a series of workshops were conducted not only for youths, but also for youth ministers. One of the workshop leaders was none other than Bishop Clark, whose session centered on the people and experiences strongly influencing youths' lives.

"Things that you admire much in others are already present in you," the bishop remarked.

Another workshop — led by Nora Bradbury-Haehl, youth minister at St. Joseph's and Holy Spirit churches in Penfield — dealt with the difference between love and infatuation in relationships. Some of the youths' responses noted that infatuation ends but love is unconditional, and infatuation deals with physical attraction while love focuses more on internal qualities.

"Vision Quest," a conference modeled after the recent diocesan Synod, was held over the three-day period. Small groups comprising five regions conducted discussions regarding priorities in youth ministry, and the regions' findings were then presented to Bishop Clark during Sunday's closing program.

Some of the final recommendations

included having a paid youth minister as well as a youth budget in every parish (Genesee Valley); an increase in youth activities (Southern Tier); outreach to hurting teens (Finger Lakes); regional youth Masses and other social activities (Monroe County North); and teen representation on parish councils (Monroe County South).

Bishop Clark assured the gathering that he would convey the recommendations to diocesan officials and priests, as well as the Synod Implementation Committee.

Fun, fun, fun

Sunday-morning brunch was attended by bleary-eyed youths who were lamenting about the amount of sleep they had — or rather, hadn't — received on Friday and Saturday nights.

Curfews did not go into effect until well past midnight, when prayer sessions and pizza parties in the dormitories had finally concluded. In addition, youths got the chance to revel in this giant-sized slumber party through Saturday-evening festivities such as pulsating DJ dance music in the Student Union auditorium, and karaoke on the union's upper level.

Although Bishop Clark probably spoke for the entire older set as Saturday night's entertainment session neared its conclusion, adult youth ministers and chaperons seemed to be enjoying all the rocking and rolling.

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