



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

(From left) Jennifer Knitter of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Stephanie Jensen of St. Michael's, Penn Yan, Tiffany Sorgen of St. Andrew's, Dundee, and Rose Jensen of St. Michael's, Penn Yan, join hands during the Lord's Prayer at the Saturday Mass.

Disabilities do not deter guitarist, teenager

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

GENESEO — He took a water break by clenching a paper cup with his teeth and tilting his head back.

He then returned to his oration, punctuating his impassioned message with equally moving songs. He sang in a clear, powerful voice while he played his guitar ...

With his toes.

After the lecture, Tony Melendez — who was born with no arms — again used his feet to sign autographs for teenagers who had attended his workshop Saturday, Aug. 5.

By his actions, Melendez was following the same advice he imparted upon the attentive youths that afternoon.

"Grow, be strong, and please — please — I beg you, believe in yourselves," the Diocesan Youth Convention's keynote speaker urged.

"You do not need arms, legs or eyes. All you need is a heart."

Ironically, it was a person sitting farthest away from Melendez who could perhaps most closely identify with his words.

Because her wheelchair could not get down the lecture-room steps, Becky Kehoe took in Melendez' workshop from the back row.

Born with spina bifida, a congenital defect characterized by imperfect closure of part of the spinal column, 18-year-old Becky is only able to walk short distances. Still, she was a full participant during the Aug. 4-6 convention, held at the State University of New York College at Geneseo.

She attended workshops, such as the one led by Melendez; joined in prayer sessions and Saturday Mass; and even enjoyed some Saturday-night entertainment by taking a turn on the dance floor.

"My parents tried to bring me up as normal as possible, but obviously that's not easy," said Becky, a parishioner and youth-group member at St. Michael's Church in Newark.

Yet Becky enjoys a wide range of activities. She is a past participant with Girl Scouts, and enjoys baby-sitting and volunteer work with children. She plans to attend college so she can study interpreting for the deaf.

Becky said the chance to see Melendez was one of her main motivations for attending the convention.

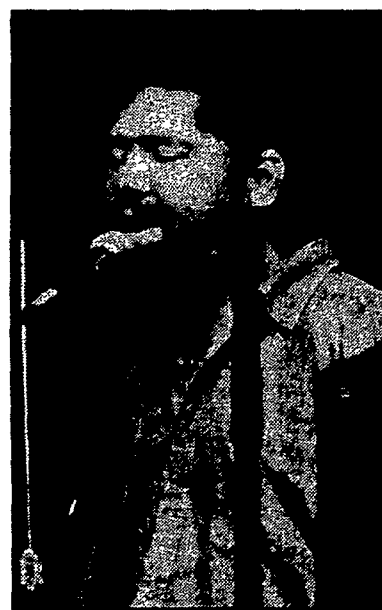
"I really sympathized with him," she said. "I wanted to see how a person with



Tony Melendez, born without any arms, plays his guitar with his feet during the Saturday Mass at the Diocesan Youth Convention in Geneseo.



Paul Anastasi, youth minister at Irondequoit's Christ the King Church, offers a hug during the sign of peace.



Tony Melendez performs during the closing part of the Mass.

a different kind of disability could get along. I was impressed how he can live with his disability as well as he does."

While Becky looks forward to her senior year at Newark High School, Melendez continues his demanding tour schedule which sees him travel worldwide more than 200 days per year.

The 33-year-old native of Nicaragua — who now resides in Dallas — began developing his career as a 16-year-old by teaching himself to play the guitar.

"I've never seen Tony come home crying because he couldn't do something or somebody made fun of him," Melendez' brother and touring partner, Jose, told the workshop participants. "I hope when you feel like giving up, you'll think of something he said."

Melendez' breakthrough performance came in 1987 when he played for Pope John Paul II — and a worldwide television audience — in Los Angeles. Since then he's traveled to 49 states and several foreign countries, recorded four albums, and published an autobiography "Gift of Hope."

Influencing youths' spiritual lives is a special focus for Melendez, he told the *Catholic Courier*. His speeches and music for this age group encompass three major themes: "God, self-worth and family."

"I had that spark for the Lord at their age, and I want to put the same spark into them somehow," Melendez said. "Maybe my uniqueness is just enough to spark their curiosity."

Bishop Clark commissions 1995-96 DYC

The newly appointed 1995-96 Diocesan Youth Committee comprises 21 teenagers and eight adults. Members were commissioned by Bishop Matthew H. Clark during closing ceremonies of the Diocesan Youth Convention on Aug. 5.

Thirteen teenagers are beginning DYC members, and the remaining eight are entering the second half of their two-year terms.

Members of the 1995-96 Diocesan Youth Committee (new youth members in boldface), along with their parish affiliations are:

Southern Tier — Brian Feitch (Eastside Catholic Parish, Elmira); Shannon VonHagn (Our Lady of Lourdes, Elmira); Michelle Amello (Corning-Painted Post Region Catholic Community); Adam LaJohnson (Eastside Parish, Our Lady of Lourdes, Elmira).

Genesee Valley — Tara Anzalone (St. Thomas Aquinas/St. Lucy, Leicester/Rt. 201); Ben VanDurne (St. Mary's, Dansville); Rebecca Graham (St. Agnes, Avon); Adult: Laura Randazzese (St. Joseph's, Livonia).

Finger Lakes — Joe Sheppard (St. Mary's, Auburn); Kelly Carr (St. Michael's, Newark); Pat LeMay (St. Alphonsus, Auburn); Adult: Debi Housel (St. Michael's, Newark).

Northeast Monroe County — Brian Moroni (St. Cecilia's, Irondequoit); Sara Hladis (Assumption of Our Lady, Fairport); Becky Chandra (St. Jerome's, East Rochester); Adult: Marie Claus (Assumption, Fairport).

Northwest Monroe County — Paul Nagy (St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Hamlin); Jennifer Knitter (Sacred Heart Cathedral, Rochester); Adrian Fontenette (Immaculate Conception, Rochester); Adult: Sue Versluys (St. John the Evangelist, Spencerport).

Southwest Monroe County — Kelly Emerson (St. Christopher's, Chili); Shamus Hayes (St. Theodore's, Gates); Adult: Ann Murphy (St. Christopher's, Chili).

Southeast Monroe County — Farrah Cherubin (St. Bridget's, Rochester); Margaret Rickard (St. Louis, Pittsford); Adult: Carmen Quinones (St. Thomas More, Rochester).

State Region II Representatives — Joe Meyers (St. John the Evangelist, Spencerport); Kate Flanagan (St. Columba/St. Patrick, Caledonia); Adult: Michael Theisen, diocesan youth-ministry coordinator.

Outgoing teen members, all part of the inaugural DYC in 1993, are:

Jessica Colon (St. Mary of the Lake, Watkins Glen); Sharon Kollar (St. Mary's, Canandaigua); Dan Kwicien (St. Mary of the Assumption, Scottsville); Mande Mastin (St. Mary's, Honeoye); Kevin Morris (St. John the Evangelist, Spencerport); Bill McGuire (St. Louis, Pittsford); Jane Krouze (St. Casimir/St. Charles Borromeo, Elmira); Mark DeNeve (Our Mother of Sorrows, Greece); Anne Kidera (St. Thomas More, Rochester).

Other departing DYC youths are Nick DiTucci (St. Thomas More, Rochester); and Laurie Phillips (Sacred Heart, Perkinsville).

Outgoing DYC adult members are Nancy Roy (St. Mary of the Lake, Watkins Glen); Sharon Bricks (Sacred Heart, Perkinsville); and Andrea Record (St. Dominic's, Shortsville).