

Story and Photographs  
by Staff Writer  
**Mike Latona**



# JUNIOR HIGH CATHOLICS EVERYTHING

*is*  
changing  
**SO fast**

**T**hey're not really kids anymore. They're not adults yet. And many don't even fit under the listing of teenager.

Junior-high youths often struggle to determine where they fit in with the rest of the world, according to Emily Kirchoff.

"When you're my age, you're still trying to figure a lot of things out. You're growing up, and everything is changing so fast," said Emily, 13, a parishioner at St. Thomas More Church in Brighton.

Shamus Hayes, 17, pointed out that junior-high students are reaching an age where they're beginning to acquire their individuality.

"You're getting around more; you're not in one classroom all day. You begin to figure people out, and cliques develop," said Shamus, from St. Theodore's Church in Gates. "Kids are developing, and personalities develop."

Emily pointed out that Catholicism is not excluded in this development process. "You have a lot of questions about everything — especially your faith," she said.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark, also, observes the rapid change occurring among junior-high Catholics in the diocese.

"This is a particularly significant time of change in their lives," Bishop Clark commented. "They're going from being little children, to being leaders in service of their community."

As youths begin to progress toward adulthood, Bishop Clark

added, some buds of maturity can be detected in relation to their faith.

"They ask a lot of good questions. They're honestly probing, searching, questioning," he said.

Bishop Clark addressed some of these inquiries firsthand at the annual diocesan Junior High Youth Rally, held June 2 at SUNY College at Geneseo. During an open forum with the junior-high participants, the bishop was asked about his favorite cartoon characters (his answers were "Far Side," "Calvin and Hobbes," "Cathy," and "Doodles"). However, he was also faced with challenging questions on topics such as abortion, homosexuality and women's ordination to the priesthood.

Emily recalled that she was about 11 years old when she started becoming aware of "grown-up" issues such as these. The added knowledge, she said, caused her to examine her relationship with God in new ways.

"Sometimes you have doubts about it when things get tough, and you wonder where God is," Emily commented. "When you're little, you're kind of sheltered in a lot of things. Then you realize the world isn't so perfect, and it's kind of hard to comprehend why God would create things that aren't perfect."

Shamus recalled that when he was in junior high school, he detected similar elements of doubt from classmates who looked down

on religion.

"Junior-high people begin stereotyping. If you were going to church, then you were weird," Shamus recalled. "If someone were to see me pray, I could be the laugh of the day."

However, Shamus feels that these challenges can help youths aged 12 to 14 grow stronger in their convictions.

"Everybody needs to see both sides," commented Shamus, a member of the Diocesan Youth Committee.

Self-doubt and peer pressure are not the only obstacles faced by young Catholics as they begin their teen years. Jackie Bordonaro observed that scheduling also makes regular churchgoing a challenge.

"Once you get into high school, you've got a lot more things to do," said Jackie, 13, from Rochester's Church of the Annunciation.

Brandon Raven, 13, also from Annunciation, is uncertain about how strongly he'll practice his faith during high-school years. Though he said he still plans on attending Mass, his primary reason is "because my mother will still be on me."

On the other hand, Chat Hull, 12, believes his religion is a personal choice rather than something to please others.

"I'd like to choose myself," said Chat, 12, from St. Michael's Church in Penn Yan. "I don't like my decisions made for me."

Annunciation's Bridget Sick

appears to already have made her choice. Though she knows of high-schoolers who have fallen away from their faith, she's anxious to remain active in church life.

"It's something I want to stay with," Bridget, 14, said. "It's something I believe in."

Religious-education programs, along with parish youth groups, appear to be helpful vehicles in keeping junior-high students involved. In the case of Brian Roman, 12, his junior-high youth group has been a big influence on his maturing process as a Catholic.

"I feel closer to God. When I was younger, I never really came close to God. Church was boring," said Brian, from Church of the Good Shepherd in Henrietta.

Emily, who attends junior-high youth group at St. Thomas More, said it's important to share her faith with children in her own age range. For instance, she served as cantor at the Junior High Youth Rally in Geneseo.

"When I'm with older kids, I feel uncomfortable because they have more experience with the things you're talking about," Emily remarked. "Sharing with your peers is the most important thing."

By developing strong bonds, Shamus pointed out, junior-high students will be better equipped to remain strong in their faith despite the influence of detractors.

"If you're just one person, it's hard to get the support. But if there are four or five people saying, 'Yeah, I believe in God,' then the other people start to back down," he remarked.

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