



sexual abstinence known as "True Love Waits." He and 36 other Southern Tier youths took vows of chastity as part of the confirmation program held at St. Casimir's Church.

Michael, a parishioner in the Roman Catholic Community of St. Casimir and St. Charles Borromeo, said the program has come in handy as sex-related conversations have popped up more frequently in his life.

"Now that I'm working (part-time), I hear a lot more talk about it. It's kind of tough hearing those things," said Michael, 16.

He added that he's also glad he took the chastity vow because "I'm kind of starting to date now. I'm glad I have those things to keep in mind."

Strong messages about chastity are crucial in this day and age, said diocesan youth coordinator Michael Theisen. He explained that sex is a much more widespread issue for today's teens than in previous generations.

Theisen named such influences as television ads, MTV, billboards and pornography. He called them the "cultural and media explosion of promiscuity," explaining that sex is a powerful tool for advertisers.

"What's really going on is that people want to sell something. Is that reality?" Theisen asked. "Distortion has become such a part of our culture. We've made the distortion the reality."

This distortion, Theisen remarked, leads people to believe that sex is OK under any circumstances. However, he said, teens often pay a long-term emotional price for the quick physical pleasure they gain.

"They're left empty, hurt, cheated — and they're still searching for their fantasy," Theisen said. "It's a dangerous shortcut to intimacy."

Theisen stressed that teens should hold on strongly to their faith in order to win this struggle against popular influences.

"What is Jesus calling them to do in the midst of all this?" Theisen asked.

In addition, Theisen said that teens and adult mentors should dialogue on this issue as often as possible.

"What it all boils down to is nurturing and creating an environment of open communication and trust," said Theisen, who has developed a nationally distributed handbook for adult leaders titled "Sexuality: Challenges and Choices."

On the other hand, Theisen added that teens should not be ashamed of their sexual feelings.

"Our sexuality is a beautiful gift that's precious, exciting, filled with po-

tential and possibility," Theisen said. "But, like any gift, it can be misused."

Sex was also a big issue for Kelly Carr, 16, when she began dating David Denisi, 17, nearly five months ago. Both attend St. Michael's Church in Newark.

Kelly and David recalled that the subject came up one evening early in their relationship, when Kelly said she'd like to be married in a white wedding dress — the symbol of a virgin bride.

"I said, 'I'd always thought of it that way, too,'" David recalled. He explained that he, also, believes in abstaining from sex until marriage.

When she discovered that David shared her viewpoint, Kelly said she was tremendously relieved.

"I remember how happy I was," she remarked. "With him being older, you never know. Sometimes they (boys) expect more (sexually)."

Kelly added that she would never compromise her values, no matter how strongly she was attracted to anybody she was dating.

"I don't think I would give in at all. If he said something different, I'd tell him I don't want to do it. If he still felt differently, I don't think it (the relationship) would have worked out," Kelly said.

Michael of Elmira also wants to make sure he and any potential girlfriends don't have conflicting views about premarital sex.

"Personally, I'd pick somebody where I know how she stands on the issue before I start dating her," Michael said.

Kelly said that opinions on premarital sex can affect friendships as well as romantic relationships. She explained that some of her peers have become sexually active — and though she still considers them friends, she's spending less time with them.

"It's just that they're changing and I'm changing, and I feel comfortable hanging around people who believe the same things as me," Kelly said.

Jennifer said she would consider dating somebody who isn't a virgin — provided he doesn't pressure her for sex. For any guys who have a problem with her stance, she has a quick and easy solution.

"They can go date some other girl," she stated.



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