

WORLD & NATION

Local teens flock to KC

By Kevin Kelly
Catholic News Service

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Wearing Christ's crown means bearing Christ's cross, the pastor of Nativity Parish in Washington told teens at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Kansas City.

"You can't wear his crown if you can't bear his cross," Msgr. Ray East said in a homily during the closing Mass Nov. 23 at the biennial conference, attended by an estimated 18,000 youths, including 292 teens from the Diocese of Rochester. They were accompanied by Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

As thousands of teens at the closing Mass listened — and shouted back "Amen" when the Washington priest gave them the cue — Msgr. East sent many of the youths squirming in their seats when he challenged them to ask themselves how well they kept the covenant of the Nov. 20-23 conference.

In that covenant, the youths promised to stay away from drugs and alcohol, to keep a midnight curfew, stay out of the hotel rooms of other youths, and not to disturb other hotel guests while in Kansas City.

"It was a simple covenant," said Msgr. East. "But for some of us, it was hard to keep for just four days. What are we going to do when we have to keep the covenant of Jesus Christ for the rest of our lives?"

Msgr. East also congratulated the young people for their witness of faith during the conference, but told them the many more thousands of youths who didn't come need their witness when they go home.

"My heart is so burdened for young Roman Catholics who go through baptism, confirmation, and years of Catholic school and still don't have a clue who Jesus is," he said.



CNS/Doug Hesse

Young people dance on stage with singer Steve Angrisano during the opening of the National Catholic Youth Conference Nov. 20 in Kansas City, Mo. More than 18,000 youths from across the country, including nearly 300 from the Diocese of Rochester, participated in the four-day conference.

"Then when someone from (the evangelical Protestant) Crusade for Christ comes up to them on campus, it's like they are accepting Jesus for the first time," he said. "Well, if you can't find Jesus in this Catholic Church, you can't find him anywhere."

Msgr. East told the youths to learn about Jesus through his word, adding, "If you know Jesus in his word, his word will get inside of you and you will take him wherever you go."

Msgr. East said that something profound happened in Kansas City as thousands of teenagers made new friends with peers from across the nation.

"We became members of one family, the body of Christ. In this hall, there is no division. There are no strangers," he said.

He urged them to take that lesson home. "If you can build a community here in four days, you can build it anywhere," he said.

At the close of his homily, he asked youths to stand, but only if they were willing to witness to Christ at home and really meant it.

When the entire assembly stood, Msgr. East turned to the concelebrating bishops.

"I give to you, at least 14,000 strong, not the church of the future, but the church of today," he said.

Even though many of those packed into the huge H. Roe Bartle Convention Center hall could barely see as they watched the Mass on huge video screens, they remained reverently quiet when the liturgy was quiet, and reverently exuberant when the liturgy called for them to express their joy.

A glitch occurred when power failed in the altar area as youths were preparing the altar for the offering of gifts. In his closing remarks at the end of Mass, Bishop Raymond Boland of Kansas City noted that by the time the lights came on again, the youths had already completed their task.

"Maybe God was telling us that at times, we will have to work in darkness," the bishop said. "The way may not always be easy, but Jesus forewarned us that as they perse-

cuted him, they also will persecute you. We must not lose hope even in the darkest of times."

Bishop Boland thanked the teenagers for coming to his diocese.

"You have honored our city. You have graced our lives," he said. "I hope as you get older, that every time you hear the words, 'Kansas City,' you will be able to say, 'Those days that I spent in Kansas City, with all my friends, made a great difference in my life.'"

Michael Theisen, coordinator for youth ministry for the Diocese of Rochester and a participant in the conference, came back with a clear message of his own.

"I think everyone is bringing back a sense of the power and the enthusiasm that the young church of today brings to our lives and to the world," Theisen said.

Among the discussions at the conference were calls for youth involvement in the church service now, not just in the future.

"It was a very good process that really called the broader church to allow young people to become involved and use their gifts," Theisen said. That process has already begun in the diocese, he added, and thus the call for youth involvement "was certainly affirming for us and for (Bishop) Matthew Clark."

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Contains additional reporting by Lee Strong.


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