

Travel & Summer Recreation

Ohio 'Family Fests' combine prayer, work, fun

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

At first glance, the mood at Catholic Familyland was so jovial that it literally scared members of the Armstrong family.

"There were all these people smiling and waving at each other. My daughter did not get out of the car for two hours," Janice Armstrong recalled. She added that her husband, Tom, wondered aloud just what he had gotten himself into.

"So I went in the chapel and said to (the Virgin) Mary, 'You got us here, take care of our family and heal us the way you want,'" said Armstrong, a parishioner at St. Vincent DePaul Church in Churchville.

By the time they'd completed their one-week "Holy Family Fest" in 1994, Armstrong said, her family — which included four children ages 10 to 17 — was hooked.

In fact, they returned to Catholic Familyland in 1995 and hope to join in yet another Family Fest this summer, when the festivals will resume after a two-year hiatus due to facility renovation.

"It's the most wonderful place in the world," Armstrong stated.

Catholic Familyland, located in the hills of southeast Ohio, offers families a blend of recreation, work and spirituality. The 950-acre site is located in Bloomingdale, approximately 20 miles west of the Franciscan University of Steubenville. According to Jerry Coniker, director of the Family Fests, participants have come from as far away as California and Arizona.

The Family Fests' goal, Coniker said, "is to send the family back united with God." This emphasis on renewal is symbolized by daily Mass and other forms of adoration and prayer.

"Priests are hearing confessions under the trees all day," Coniker remarked.

In the evening, spiritual programs are held in Catholic Familyland's new state-of-



Families display religious banners they constructed during evening spiritual activities, a key component of Family Fests. (Photo provided by the Apostolate for Family Consecration)

the-art conference center, St. Joseph Auditorium, which seats 2,400 people. Bishops, and even cardinals, have made guest appearances at these programs.

Families not only pray together, but also work together by performing daily cleaning chores at the facility. And play is emphasized through horseback riding, swimming and volleyball during the day, and concerts and dances at night.

"Families go right from the swimming pool into adoration," Armstrong noted.

She added that activities are geared to get families back in touch with the roots of their Catholicism. "What struck me is the renewal of traditional prayers and values, especially the rosary," Armstrong said.

Theresa Hebbing, whose husband and four children attended Family Fests in 1994 and 1995, said she was elated that so many families were joined for a common cause.

"You have all these hundreds of families, people with the same ideals — conservative

and a positive atmosphere is reflected in the swimming regulations: Both females and males were required to wear tops in the pool area.

Coniker remarked that families often don't experience the full impact of these festivals until later in the week.

"They slow down — no radio, TV or newspaper. After three days, they say they're really getting back to their senses again," Coniker said.

"Many people were ordinary teens who had not wanted to be there," Armstrong recalled of her family's first trip. "But they were so excited and thrilled about what they were being taught — in a good way."

She added that, late in the week of their first trip, she was thrilled to see her children walking in a procession, "with tears in their eyes."

Registration for a week at Catholic Familyland costs \$99 per family and does not include accommodations or meals (families are allowed to bring their own food). Additional fees are charged for families who wish to rent cabins, or camper facilities, on the site.

Coniker and his wife, Gwen, began the Family Fests in 1990. They also founded the Apostolate for Family Consecration — the sponsoring organization behind Family Fests — in 1974.

Armstrong asserted that the Family Fests' ideals are crucial in an era of eroding family values. Whereas several families in her Churchville neighborhood have been torn by divorce in recent years, she said her own family has been strengthened by its attendance at Family Fests.

"I think there's peace in our family. There's been some healing," she said.

EDITORS' NOTE: Catholic Familyland will host four Family Fests this summer: July 4-10; July 18-24; Aug. 1-7; and Aug. 15-21. For registration information, call 1-800-FOR-MARY.



Elaine Armstrong, from St. Vincent DePaul Parish in Churchville, with Bernard, a Catholic Familyland staff member, enjoys one of the recreational opportunities at a Family Fest. (Photo provided by Janice Armstrong)

Catholics who are following the pope and magisterium of the church, not talking about women priests or anything like that," said Hebbing, from St. Mary's Church in Rushville.

For instance, Hebbing said, the conser-

Summer 1998 Retreat Program

Therese of Lisieux: A Spirituality for Ordinary Life
Conference Retreat June 5-7
Fr. John Welch, O.Carm.

Directed/Private Retreat Week
Personal time for silence and solitude June 7-15

The Beauty That I Am
Workshop, Anne Mulraney, Ed.D. June 21-25

Carmelite Spirituality in the Light of St. Therese
Conference Retreat June 21-25
Fr. John Malley, O. Carm.

Healing My Divine Homelessness
7th Annual Summer Seminar of Healing July 12-17
Fr. Jack McGinnis

Feast Day in Honour of Our Lady of Mount Carmel
Special devotions July 18
1-4 pm with Eucharist

DeMello Spirituality: The Freedom & Joy of Living in the Present
Workshop/Retreat, Fr. Jim Dolan, SJ July 19-25

Celebration in Honour of Blessed Titus Brandema
Eucharist 2 pm in Main Chapel July 26
& picnic (bring food & drink)

Journey to Wholeness
Workshop/Retreat August 9-14
Kathryn McMorrow

Women Spirituality and Self-Esteem
Workshop, Presenter: August 14-15
Kathryn McMorrow



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