

Diocesan Youth Convention: Five years of faith building

During this past year, Keith Smith heard a fellow youth-group member, Jennifer Frisch, make repeated glowing references to the Diocesan Youth Convention.

"Every other word out of her mouth was about the convention," remarked Keith, 15, from St. Rita's Church in Webster.

Intrigued, Keith decided to make his first visit this summer to the annual convention. By the time it had ended, Keith realized that he's among many, many diocesan teens who care deeply about their Catholic faith.

"It was neat to see so many kids that feel the same way you do about so many subjects," Keith commented.

The fifth annual convention, held Aug. 7-9 at SUNY College at Geneseo, drew a record 600 teens. Since the convention began in 1994 with 275 teens, attendance has increased at a rate of about 80 per year.

"Certainly, it's a sign that what is happening is good," said Michael Theisen, diocesan youth ministry coordinator.

Katie Miskell is among a small handful of youths who have attended all five Diocesan Youth Conventions. She said that the events' social and spiritual aspects have kept her coming back.

"You get to meet a lot of great people. It's nice when you find a lot of other teens who like their faith. To me, that's really important," remarked Katie, 19, from St. Mary's Church in Geneseo.

Theisen noted that the friendly atmosphere allows for teens to quickly overcome their shyness and apprehension.



Above, Tim Donk, 16, of St. Patrick's Church in Seneca Falls, participates in a discussion group during an Aug. 8 workshop at the Diocesan Youth Convention. Below, dancers rehearse for the Mass held later that afternoon. The convention took place Aug. 7-9 at SUNY College at Geneseo.



"It's an extremely inclusive experience; this is one of the most inclusive groups you can be around," he said. "You can't just stand on the sideline. You've got to join in."

Each convention has featured a wide range of activities: keynote addresses by nationally renowned performers; large- and small-group faith sharing; educational workshops; dances and other recreational events; and rousing Saturday-afternoon liturgies.

Keith said he gained a great deal from a workshop, "Who's Calling You," which dealt with church ministry and religious life. Keith — who had once considered a priestly vocation but decided against it — said the workshop provided him with valuable alternatives.

"They showed how there are many other ways you can serve without being ordained — pastoral associates, volunteers and parish council," Keith said.

Story by Mike Latona
Photos by Bill Hawken

Katie remarked that the workshops have long-lasting effects.

"You can get a lot. There are always small things you don't realize you remember until later," she said.

Theisen said that the convention's format has gone largely unchanged. However, one mainstay was absent this year: Bishop Matthew H. Clark missed the convention for the first time because of his trip to the Holy Land.

The bishop's presence had a strong effect on Joe Walker during the 1996 convention, which he attended with a group from St. Jerome's Church in East Rochester. Joe, who was not Catholic at the time, said he "had a great time" meeting the bishop for the first time.

Joe said he also enjoyed the spontaneity of the Mass, which included clapping and lively music.

"It was really exciting," Joe said. "With that age group, it's probably a good idea to have it fast-paced."

In fact, Joe's overall experience at the convention was so powerful that he decided to become Catholic.

"I was blown away by everything that happened there. After that, I had this feeling I had to make a commitment," said Joe, who was initiated into the Catholic Church this past Easter.

Theisen concluded that the convention's upbeat nature allows for teens to celebrate Christ's presence.

"It helps them see that Christ is already alive with them, not out there as something they have to earn," Theisen commented.



Father Brian Cool, co-pastor at St. Michael's Church in Penn Yan, celebrates the closing Mass. He's wearing a sailor hat to symbolize the convention's theme, "Walking On Water."

DYC: Hard-working teens behind the scenes

When Jared Marx was asked two years ago to join the Diocesan Youth Committee, he said yes. But a part of him wondered what he was getting himself into.

"I figured it was just another committee. I was thinking, I'm going to sit in a room — for a long time," remarked Jared, 18, a parishioner in the Coming-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community.

Turns out Jared was partially correct. His two-year tenure on the Diocesan Youth Committee included several lengthy meetings, some lasting more than four hours.

"We met forever," Jared said with a laugh.

But the meetings were far from dull and boring. Instead, Jared gradually found himself becoming part of a special group of creative leaders.

"There's so much friendship and love that develops," Jared said. "I think God's presence is felt very much by everyone that's there. If you keep God's spirit involved in the process, that adds a lot to the closeness."

This spirit is passed on to hundreds of other teens from around the diocese. According to Michael Theisen, diocesan youth ministry coordinator, the DYC was completely responsible for planning the program at the Diocesan Youth Convention held Aug. 7-9.

DYC members designed the welcoming program and planned the weekend's faith-sharing sessions, and also performed such other tasks as decorating the meeting areas, introducing speakers at workshops and directing cars.

"We get there a full two days before the convention, and there is no free time. They're working hard from 9 a.m. to midnight," Theisen said.

The DYC also plans the one-day Junior High Youth Rally held annually in late May. In addition, DYC members serve as chaperons and helpers at such other diocesan youth events as the Hands of Christ awards ceremony in the fall, the Run for the Young in the spring and teen retreats throughout the school year.

The committee was formed in 1993. Members are selected randomly from nominations by parish leaders. They, along with adult DYC representatives, serve two-year terms.

The DYC is broken down into five regions — Southern Tier, Genesee Valley, Finger Lakes, Monroe West and Monroe East. A total of 24 teens and seven adults serve those areas. They meet monthly, in either regional settings or as a collective group.

Theisen said he's amazed at the group dynamics that occur at DYC planning meetings.

"All of a sudden these ideas emerge. They're always ideas that no one could have created on their own," he remarked.

Meanwhile, Jared has appreciated the chance to make friends with people from around the diocese through his DYC affiliation.

"You get a wider view of the church; it's not just your local building anymore," said Jared, who will attend the University of Notre Dame this fall.

Jared's final moments as a DYC member were among his most satisfying. He gave the Diocesan Youth Convention's closing ceremony keynote address; then he and other outgoing DYC members received a standing ovation from the conventioners.

"That was a great thing — when you're putting in all this time, and hope that you're doing something useful," Jared said. "I guess it was surprising to me that they had that much appreciation. If you could feel that, and know it was really true they could get something out of the convention, then that's all the satisfaction I could ask for."

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