

On the MOON

Story by Mike Latona

Photos by Mike Mergen

When was the last time you stepped outside with hundreds of people at 10 p.m. — for a sacrament?

The great outdoors, rather than the confessional box, served as a unique setting for a reconciliation service that opened the Diocesan Youth Convention. The sixth annual convention took place Aug. 6-8 at SUNY College at Geneseo.

"It was a perfect night. The stars were shining brightly. Where I was sitting, I could see the Big Dipper right over the priests," said Jen Migliore, 18, from St. Mary's Church in Geneseo.

This marked the first time a reconciliation service has been a part of the convention. Michael Theisen, diocesan coordinator of youth ministry, explained that the service was linked with this year's theme, "Winds of Change." Reconciliation is also a focus of Pope John Paul II's for the Jubilee Year 2000, Theisen added.

The Friday service began at Wadsworth Auditorium with teens writing on balloons what they'd like to change, or let go of, in their lives; then the balloons were turned loose.

The gathering proceeded outside and along a candle-lit walkway to an open field, where 30 priests awaited to offer the sacrament of reconciliation. Bishop Matthew H. Clark ended the two-hour service around midnight with a closing prayer.

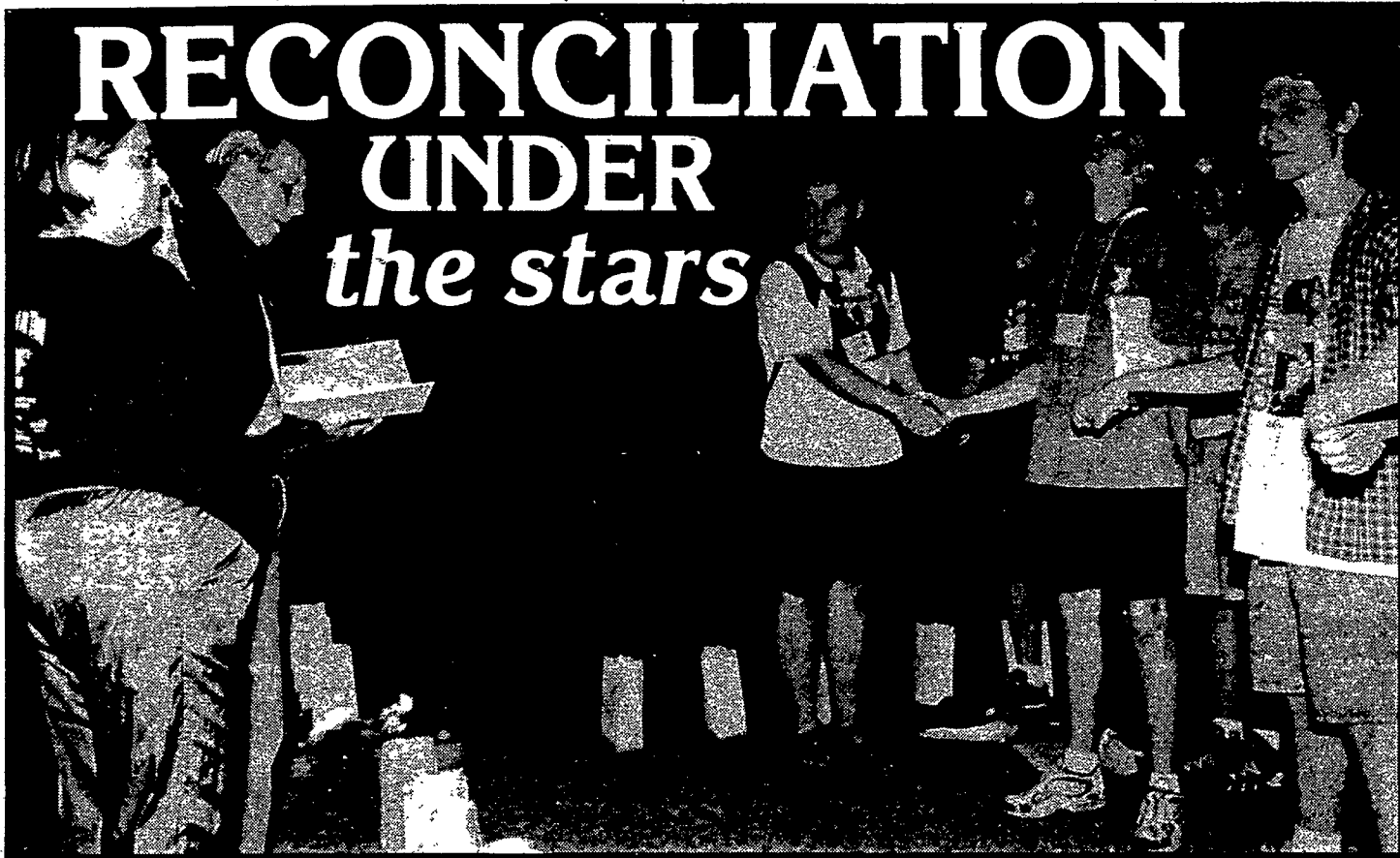
Participating teens said the outdoor setting made them feel more at ease while making confession.

"You could see the stars in the sky. You could feel more," said Jennifer Hosenfeld, 16, from St. Rita's Church in Webster.

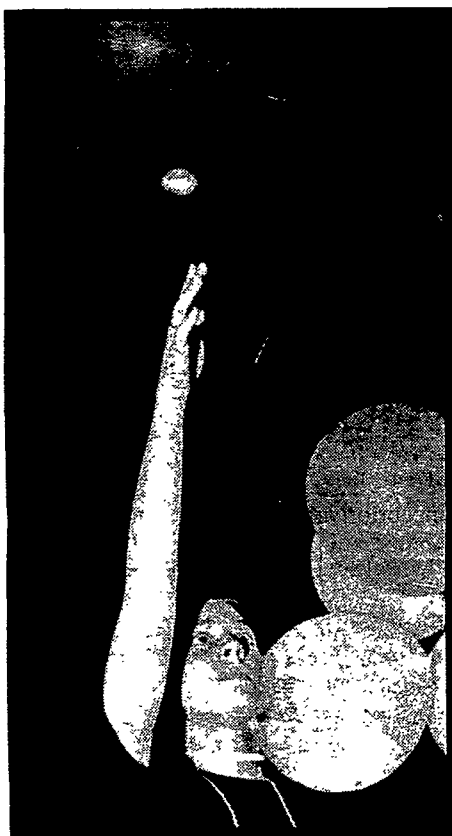
"It was the whole atmosphere. It wasn't as structured as going to church in a little box," said Trisha Tamara, 16, from Elmira's St. Casimir/St. Charles Borromeo Roman Catholic Community.

Brandy Butler, 16, from St. Rita's in Webster, said she had previously attended ad-

RECONCILIATION UNDER the stars



Bishop Matthew Clark says the closing prayer at Friday's candlelit reconciliation service.



Michelle Gammariello, a member of the Diocesan Youth Committee, releases balloons with messages to God during Friday's service.

outdoor reconciliation service in Massachusetts and enjoys the group setting.

"You can see the other priests and you know they're all there to try and help you out," Brandy said.

Stephanie Zeh said she was very relaxed with the priest to whom she went, Father John Hayes, pastor of St. Joseph's/St. William's Parish in Livonia and Conesus.

"It turned out he knew my whole family. I could have talked to him all day," said Stephanie, 17, from Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Theisen said the service was held at its unusual hour so that enough priests could attend and not have conflicts with their parish schedules.

"I was surprised to see that many priests. I don't think I've ever seen that many," said Kerrie Curran, 14, from St. Felix/St. Francis churches in Clifton Springs and Phelps.

Josh Crane, 18, gave credit to the priests for gathering so late at night.

"I think it says a lot for the priests," said Josh, from St. Mary's Church in Auburn.

Another St. Mary's youth, Kelly Delaney, 15, said she was also struck by the fact that hundreds of teens sought out reconciliation from those priests.

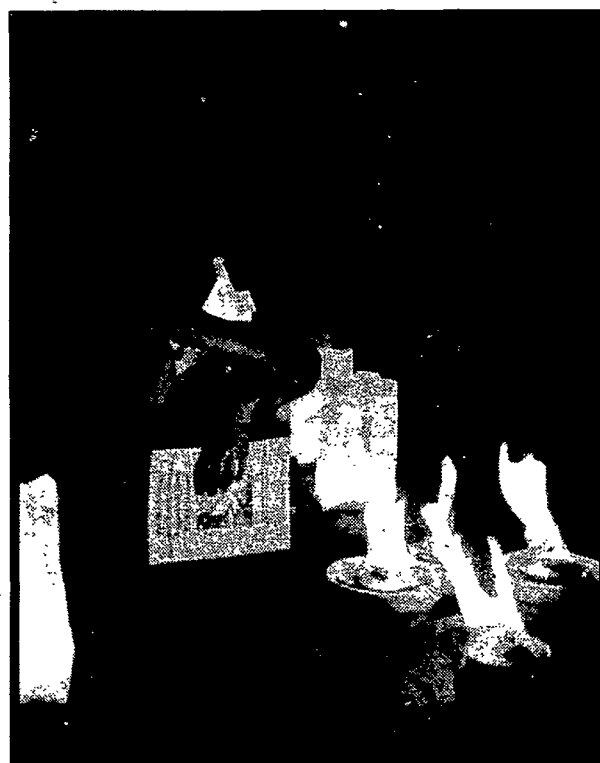
"That impressed me even more," she said.

The event was helped along by some cooperative Friday-night weather, Theisen noted.

"We prayed for good weather. It looked



Lori Blinn, left, of St. Francis Parish in Catatonk, and Tosha Heese enjoy a lighter moment at the conference.



Audrey Smerbeck of St. Louis Parish in Pittsford reflects over the burning lamps that marked the end of the procession portion of the reconciliation service.

ominous most of the day, and then it became incredibly clear toward evening. There was the bluest sky you could possibly see. So God is good," Theisen said.

The reconciliation service led into a busy weekend that included afternoon workshops Aug. 7, followed by a folk Mass and an evening "fun-for-all" full of dancing, karaoke and other recreational activities on the Geneseo campus. According to Theisen, approximately 600 teens from around the diocese stayed for the weekend,

as well as another 100 who attended a Saturday-only session.

There wasn't a lot of time left over for sleep, according to Stephanie and her roommate for the weekend, Sacred Heart Cathedral's Katie O'Shaughnessy, 17. They said they had each slept less than two hours Friday night, playing cards and jacks. Stephanie added that she was ready for more at the Saturday fun-for-all.

"I want to dance all night long," she said.

Serving as keynoters for the convention were Doug Brummel, a musician, humorist and storyteller; and Scarecrow and Tinmen, a contemporary Christian band that uses the two characters from the "Wizard of Oz" as its name to symbolize that each of its members has a new heart and new mind in Christ.

Bishop Clark took part in the weekend fresh off his July vacation. He has attended the convention every year except 1998, when he was on a pilgrimage to Israel. He expressed his appreciation for the gathered teens during the Aug. 7 Mass he celebrated.

"Your presence, in more ways than you can imagine, has touched others here," Bishop Clark told the teens.

COMING NEXT WEEK:

Single-sex high schools