

OPINIONS

Devotee defends Ohio conferences

Catholic Courier

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The *Catholic Courier* wishes to provide space for readers throughout the diocese to express opinions on all sides of the issues. We welcome original, signed letters about current issues affecting church life.

Although we cannot publish every letter we receive, we seek, insofar as possible, to provide a balanced representation of expressed opinions and a variety of reflections on life in the church. We will choose letters for publication based on likely reader interest, timeliness and a sense of fair play. Our discerning readers may determine whether to agree or disagree with the letter writers' opinions.

Letters must not exceed 500 words. Anonymous letters and the use of pseudonyms are unacceptable. We reserve the right to edit letters for legal and other concerns. With respect to errors in submitted text, we will correct spelling only.

Mail letters to: *Catholic Courier*, P.O. Box 24379, Rochester, N.Y. 14624. Please include your full name, phone number and complete address for purposes of verification.

To the editors:

When we received our July 27 issue of the *Catholic Courier*, I opened up right away to the On the Move section about the youth in our diocese. I was really excited to see that the article was about the Steubenville youth conferences. I just returned from my fourth conference this summer with my youth group at Immaculate Conception in Ithaca, New York. Overall, I was pleased with the article until I read the last five paragraphs. I was very disappointed that the article concluded with such a negative tone. Any pastors or youth ministers who may have read the article with interest could have easily been turned off to the possibility of taking their own youth groups to the conferences since they were only recommended "if you like to sing and dance and make a total fool out of yourself." Initially, Steubenville is very different for any first timers who are not familiar with the praise and enthusiasm which are found at the conferences. But, along with the singing and dancing, there are moments of quiet reflection when many teenagers begin to truly contemplate the presence of God in their lives.

I was most upset by the quote from Michael Theisen, our diocesan coordinator of youth ministry, who commented that some youth found the conferences "less than satisfying" since they did not "meet their expectations." I think that Theisen should not have been quoted since he was talking from second-hand opinions and never attended a conference. Steubenville is such an amazing experience that the only way to truly understand it is to attend a conference yourself.

One final comment I have is regarding the last sentence of the article. (Andrew Dyckman said) that you should not go to a retreat "if your parents are forcing you and you don't want to go." Since "you are the only one who can make it worthwhile ... and if you don't get into it and try to have fun, you won't." I have to disagree with this comment. Not because I like being forced into things by my parents, but because I know that God can work in powerful ways in the lives of teenagers who come to the conferences, even if their parents made them come. One of our chaperones shared with my group that her parents forced her to attend a retreat in high school and because of it she is now contemplating the religious life. Also, many of the teens who share their stories at Steubenville start off by saying, "I didn't want to be here, but my parents made me come. Now, I am so glad that they did because God has changed my life!" I encourage all youth who have never been to a Steubenville conference to talk with their youth leaders and get some kids together. It is so amazing to know that 25,000 teenagers across America went to these retreats this summer in order to grow closer to God. This is a bold affirmation of the bright future of the Catholic Church since the youth are our future and the youth are excited about their wonderful, amazing God!

Maria Keating
Dart Drive, Ithaca



Photo courtesy Franciscan University at Steubenville

The campus of Franciscan University at Steubenville.

Conferences deserve praise

To the editors:

Last week's *Courier* article on the Catholic Youth Conference at Steubenville University did a nice job of capturing the essence of what takes place there and at nine other similar conferences around the USA for over 20,000 teens. For some reason, though, the writer found it necessary to counter the enthusiastic, positive testimony of the teens and youth ministers who attended the conference with cautionary remarks from Michael Theisen, our diocesan youth coordinator, who admitted he had never experienced Steubenville. Such a negative reaction from a diocesan official can't help but dampen the spirits of all those youth from our diocese who came home from the conference "on fire for the Lord." These kids should have been praised and affirmed for devoting a summer weekend to strengthening their spiritual life, when they could have spent it at the malls, the movies or Seabreeze.

We invite Mr. Theisen to join us next year at Steubenville. He will see for himself how 2,500 kids along with hundreds of adults, scores of priests, deacons and religious, and even a bishop, share a beautiful, spiritual, communal experience of Roman Catholic liturgies, devotions, Sacraments and values, while being encouraged and drawn into a closer personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He will see for himself what we have witnessed in the 12 years we have been chaperones at Steubenville: 1) an incredible atmosphere

of civility and a noticeable absence of any coarse or crude language (even in the men's bathrooms); 2) virtually no inappropriate behavior and absolutely no vandalism — there is an obvious respect and reverence for one another, and for the holy ground on which the conference takes place; 3) a reverent, spirited participation in all of the liturgies and worship services, including Eucharistic Adoration and Benediction. How many of our kids even know what this is?

We need to support and encourage our youth to take advantage of every available opportunity to get away from the secular world for a day or two or three to reconnect with God and get regrounded in their Catholic faith. They need to go where they will hear over and over how so many of the messages our culture bombards them with every day are in total conflict with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and can only lead to unhappiness and pain. They need to be given the tools to look the false messengers of the world in the eye and say, "Get out of here! Leave me alone. I'm going the way Jesus wants me to go because it's the best thing I can do for myself, my future, my dreams."

This is what our kids experience at the Catholic Youth Conference at Steubenville every year. It is the kind of experience we should applaud and celebrate and do our best to duplicate right here in the diocese for as many of our kids as we can.

Deacon Ron and Catherine Tocci
West Church Street, Fairport

Conference was jubilee-year treat for her hungry soul

To the editors:

My husband and I are looking forward to a quiet self-directed retreat this week — our second this summer — at the Franciscan Mt. Iraneous Mountain in the Southern Tier. Being retirement age we appreciate solitude and contemplative prayer time. However, I want the readers of the *Courier* to know that one of the most powerful prayer experiences I have ever had occurred the weekend I accompanied a youth group to the Steubenville Youth Conference. Joining the 2,500 young people and other adult supervisors was uplifting. Indeed there was music and dancing as reported by Mike Latona in the July

27 issue. Beyond that however, there was a spirit of unsurpassed holiness. The Holy Hour — Benediction and Adoration — lasted three and one-half hours.

I have never known teens to arrive ahead of time for church — if they even go — let alone as much as three hours. I came away with so much hope for the future of our Faith and the Church. While such a weekend — there are now a number of such conferences since they fill up early — may not be for everyone, I sure am glad and grateful I could experience this unforgettable trip. I thank the person who gave me the gift of going and all the kids who rode the song-filled bus and the

folks of the parish who financially support such worthwhile endeavors. Who can argue its significance when the confession lines are as long as the shower lines?

Sometimes events do make us uncomfortable but it does not mean the event should have been avoided. I would encourage anyone to attend such a conference/retreat and to be open to the spirit and never discount what could happen. In this Jubilee Year, the Taste of Heaven was a gourmet treat for a hungry soul.

Kathryn Auman
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