

a Young

Event at Coinonia reunites Toronto pilgrims

Story by Rob Cullivan

More than a score of Catholic young adults gathered outside the dining area at Camp Coinonia to be led in prayer before dinner by Nora Bradbury-Haehl on Aug. 17.

Bradbury-Haehl told the group to make sure they shouted "Amen!" when they concluded their prayer. They complied with her wishes and were rewarded by hearing their "Amen" echo through the hills of Italy Valley in Yates County.

It was a fittingly symbolic moment for the young adults and Bradbury-Haehl, who recently left her position as the Diocese of Rochester's program specialist for youth and young adult ministry. That's because this event at the camp was the "echo" of a much larger event—World Youth Day, July 23-28, in Toronto. Dedicated to Catholic young adults from around the world, WYD was highlighted by a four-day visit from Pope John Paul II. The event drew hundreds of thousands of people, including 35 diocesan young adults and 1,000 diocesan teens and adult chaperones.

The daylong reunion for young adults Bradbury-Haehl accompanied to World Youth Day in Toronto consisted of swimming, hiking, a Mass, dinner and overnight camping for some. The World Youth Day journey was Bradbury-Haehl's final major endeavor in her diocesan job before she took up her current duties as youth ministry coordinator at St. Paul's Parish in Webster. Bradbury-Haehl organized the reunion with the help of Sue Versluys, diocesan program specialist for youth ministry and former director of Camp Coinonia.

After dinner, some of the young adults reflected on what going to Toronto had meant to them. One of them said World Youth Day was "like a retreat but a thousand times stronger." All of them said seeing the pope was one of the greatest of the event's many high points.

"It was a very spiritual and emotional time to see the pope," said Ladlene Rasquinha, a 21-year-old parishioner at St. Anne's Church, Rochester. "You're there with a million people, but you ... forget they're there. He's such an icon in Roman Catholic society."

Rasquinha, a senior at the University of Buffalo, also enjoyed the catechetical sessions that were offered, as well as meeting people from all over the world. She particularly remembered one archbishop telling a group of young adults that it was important for them not to wait for the church's leadership to create church initiatives.

"He said if you want things done, you should do them yourself," Rasquinha recalled.

Ashley Perez, 18, a parishioner at Good Shepherd Church in Henrietta, said she was impressed by the size of the crowds.

"It was a marching parade 24/7 is how best you describe it," she said.

One of her favorite moments came when she prayed with three friends right after seeing the pope during his welcoming ceremony at Exhibition Place July 25. She also enjoyed seeing a Christian band called Day's Wage, which she called an "unexpected highlight."

Perez is planning on a career in youth ministry, and said the trip bolstered her faith.

"It's kind of like when you're there you don't think it's changing you, but you feel it when you come back," she said. "There were highs and lows, but it was such a bonding experience. Sometimes when I was there I was like, 'I want to go home,'



James Steirn/Photo intern

Kim Reed (from left), Ashley Perez and Ladlene Rasquinha sing the Our Father during Mass as part of a daylong reunion of World Youth Day 2002 pilgrims at Camp Coinonia in Yates County.



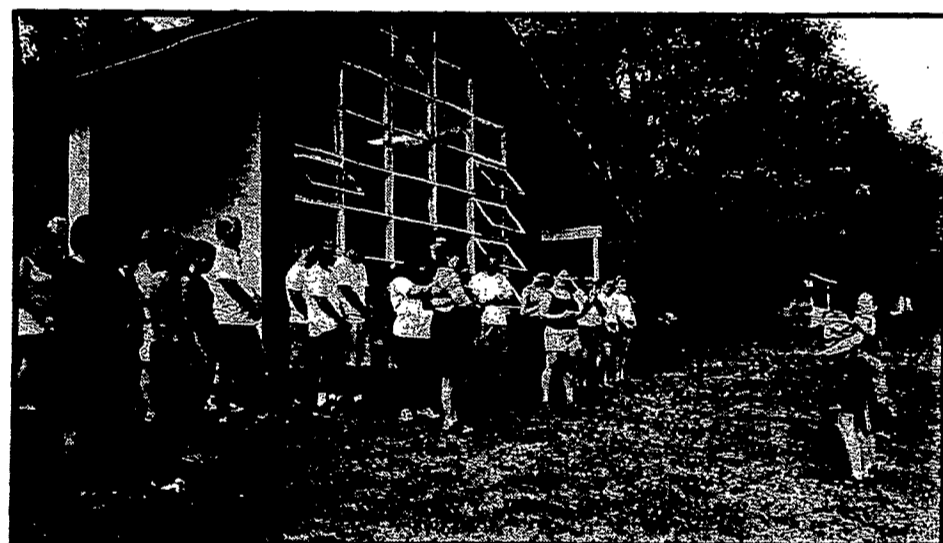
Father Joe Marcoux gives the homily during Mass.

but I wouldn't take it back for the world."

Nick DeLucenay, 20, a volunteer catechist at Holy Cross Church in Charlotte, said he enjoyed speaking Spanish to people he met from Paraguay, and said he liked the event's emphasis on young people being the salt of the earth and light of the world. He also thought the evening Stations of the Cross in downtown Toronto July 19 was a great experience. The stations were acted out by dozens of people, and included musical presentations and prayers.

"It was very visual, and I just liked the stages and how everything was set up," he said.

Tim Santo, 26, an organist at St. Leo's Parish in Hilton, said he went to Toronto to bolster his faith, which had become



Nora Bradbury-Haehl (right) leads the participants in a prayer before dinner. Their shout of "Amen" echoed off the hills of Italy Valley.

somewhat bogged down in day-to-day concerns. Santo, who also serves as a volunteer youth minister at St. Thomas More Parish, Brighton, said he found the event "so positive." Like DeLucenay, he also liked the emphasis on young people being salt and light.

"The message behind that was to go home and spread God's word and to be the salt in your communities back home," he said.

Miriam Ojeda, 29, did not attend the reunion at Camp Coinonia, but shared many of the same feelings expressed by the Camp Coinonia event participants. Ojeda volunteers with the liturgy and catechetical programs at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in Rochester, and she and her husband, Luis, were among several Hispanic young adults from the diocese who traveled to World Youth Day.

"As a Hispanic Catholic it was very meaningful for me hearing the pope talking in Spanish," she said, referring to the pope's many multilingual speeches. "It made me feel closer to him, to the church and to God and to everything that was happening around me ... We saw people from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, Panama, Costa Rica, Peru, Venezuela. It made me feel like I was with my family."

She added that she was carrying the Puerto Rican flag at the papal Mass in Downsview Park on July 21, when someone tapped her on her shoulder. She realized it was an old acquaintance of hers from her hometown in Puerto Rico.

"It was just one of those persons that you know you are from the same place but never really developed any type of relationship," she said. "I couldn't even remember her name; she did not remember mine either, but just to be there and see each other again with 800,000 around us, it was incredible."

Like the other young adults who attended World Youth Day, Ojeda said she was inspired by seeing the pope in person. She added that her husband supports her ministry, but she isn't always sure he wants to really be in church. However, when they saw the pope together before the vigil at Downsview on July 20, her husband's reaction deeply moved her.

"When we saw the pope just a few feet away from us, the emotion and feelings that invaded me were overwhelming," she said. "When I turned to see my husband, he was crying, too. We hugged ... And then he said to me, 'The pope touched me, God touched me.'"