

Hands of Christ awards honor teens

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

On the evening of Oct. 8, an overflowing parking lot and standing-room-only congregation indicated something big was going on at Fairport's St. John of Rochester Church.

And to think the gathering was only the first of *three* Hands of Christ services this month.

Hands of Christ awards annually recognize outstanding high-school seniors in the diocese for their contributions to church, school and community. This year nearly 700 young people from a total of 99 diocesan parishes will receive the Hands of Christ. Several will be featured in *Courier* articles in the upcoming weeks and months.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark presided at St. John of Rochester during the Oct. 8 service, and was scheduled to do likewise at Our Mother of Sorrows in Greece Oct. 15 and St. Mary in Elmira Oct. 19. Additionally, many parishes will honor their Hands of Christ recipients during Sunday Masses, especially on World Youth Sunday weekend Oct. 26-27.

The theme of Christ's hands ran throughout the Oct. 8 ceremony. Father James Boyle, pastor of St. John of Rochester, read the Gospel passage from the Book of John, Chapter 13, in which Jesus insists on washing his disciples' feet. Then Sue Versluys, diocesan youth-ministry program specialist, lauded the teens occupying several pews for their many examples of being Hands of Christ.

"Hands are just hands unless they possess a heart full of love and caring," Versluys said. She noted the many reasons for which Hands of Christ recipients had been nominated: helping elderly people in family and community; volunteering at agencies to help feed and clothe the needy; filling such liturgical positions as altar servers, ushers and lectors; being peer staffers at youth retreats; volunteering for religious-education programs; and spending time with people who may be lonely, unpopular or timid.

One Hands of Christ recipient, Michael Rondeau, gave a witness talk to the congregation in which he emphasized, "Each time you open a heart, you open your own that much more." He related coming to this realization when, a few years ago, he casually invited a friend on a diocesan retreat and later found out she'd had a deeply spiritual experience there.

Rondeau, a parishioner of Good Shepherd in Henrietta, concluded his talk by challenging his fellow



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Jessica Mattiace, a parishioner at St. Hyacinth in Auburn, accepts her Hands of Christ award from Bishop Matthew H. Clark during an Oct. 8 service at Fairport's St. John of Rochester Church.

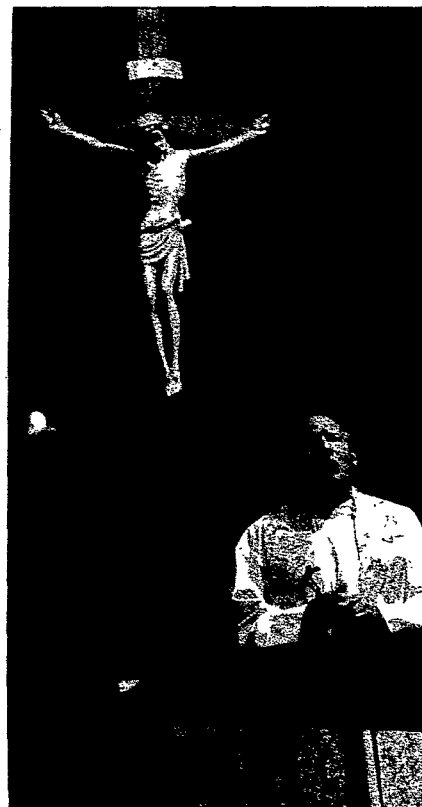
seniors to continue doing their good works after high school. "What are your gifts? How have you used them, and how can you better use them in the future?" he asked.

Bishop Clark followed by distributing Hands of Christ plaques, greeting each recipient individually. He then led a loud round of applause for the teens before offering his own reflections.

"You are Hands of Christ in a world where people yearn to be touched, let in, supported and encouraged," Bishop Clark told the high-school seniors. "We need your light and your gifts desperately. We want them and cherish them."

The bishop also asked adults in the crowd to think back to what was going on in their lives when they were 18 years old, saying that earlier in the ceremony he'd reflected on that period of his own life, "wondering what tomorrow would bring." He joked to the Hands of Christ recipients that "someday in a time beyond imagining, you'll be as old as we (adults) are."

Following the ceremony, flashing lights filled the air as teens posed



Bishop Clark sings with the congregation during the service.

for photos with family members while showing off their shiny new plaques. As the crowd thinned out, one recipient, Aleshia Miller, gave a thumbs-up to the ceremony.

"I didn't know I was getting nominated. I was pretty excited," said Aleshia, 17. "I feel honored to represent my church."

Aleshia helped start up a youth group at Church of the Epiphany in Sodus when she was a freshman. She, along with several other young parishioners, traveled to the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis last fall. Aleshia further noted that the youth group, which also includes St. Rose of Lima Parish in Sodus Point, has carried out such charitable projects as making food baskets.

"Church is important to me," Aleshia stated. "I think it's important for teens to be involved in church."

www.catholiccourier.com