

Retreatants applaud reconciliation format

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

LIVONIA — The sacrament of reconciliation hadn't been a regular part of Sean O'Donnell's life — mainly, he said, because he wasn't fully aware of its availability.

"I never really thought young people did go," said Sean, 14, who attends Holy Ghost Parish in Gates.

Sean found out otherwise when he attended his first Awakening Faith retreat (grades 9-10) Nov. 15-17 at Camp Stella Maris. He was among 60 teens and staff members who took part in a deeply spiritual reconciliation service. "You could feel God alive in the room," he said.

Reconciliation services have been a staple of diocesan weekend retreats going back to the 1970s. Taking place in the evening on Saturday, the second day of the retreat, they usually last well over two hours.

A typical service begins with music, readings and a witness talk. For instance, Amy Coppola, 16, made a presentation at Camp Stella Maris on the subject of forgiveness. She related the story of a friend whom she had judged unfairly when they first became acquainted; as she came to know the person better, she found that the friend held no ill feelings and had already forgiven her.

"Basically my point was, no matter what, God has forgiven you," said Amy, from Our Lady of Lourdes in Brighton, who served as a peer leader on the retreat.

Following these opening activities, one of the adult staff members offers an explanation of the sacrament of reconciliation. Retreatants are then encouraged to seek out any one of a number of priests on hand for individual confession. (Abbreviated confessions were heard Nov. 16 when poor weather disrupted travel to Camp Stella Maris, leaving only one priest available.)

Under normal circumstances, youths are encouraged to spend as much time as necessary with their confessors — an important factor since many teens who attend retreats haven't been to confession in years. After retreatants emerge from the makeshift confessionals, staff members wash their hands with holy water and give them small crosses. From there, the teens join thematic "prayer corners," which offer quiet discussion and reflection on issues related to faith, forgiveness, healing and peace.

Sean said that the faith-filled atmosphere Nov. 16 made just about everyone eager to seek reconciliation — "especially when you see oth-



Nancy Wiechec/CNS

World Youth Day 2000 pilgrims receive the sacrament of reconciliation in makeshift confessionals set up outdoors at Rome's Circus Maximus.

er people your age going." Indeed, Michael Theisen, diocesan director of youth ministry, said teens usually find a greater comfort level in the retreat format than in their parishes.

Teens shouldn't feel intimidated if they don't know the correct procedure for making confession, Theisen said. "We tell them you can't do it a wrong way. We say that the priest will walk you through that."

Diocesan Youth Ministry Specialist Sue Versluys said nobody is forced to make confession on retreats. Yet, "We always encourage kids to at least sit down with a priest and have a discussion," she noted.

Versluys described the reconciliation service as a "conversion point of the retreat," while Theisen described it as "the powerful, deep ex-

perience of forgiveness, liberating (youths) from their troubles."

Chris May, 15, said he makes confession both at retreats as well as his parish, St. Jude's in Gates. "God always knows your sins. But he prefers you get it off your chests, or it builds and builds," he explained.

"It's important that when we get off track, to reconcile," Amy said. "It's such a powerful moment, to hear a human say that (you're forgiven) to you."

Steven Wegman, 14, said he got that feeling at the Awakening Faith retreat. "I think I would like to start going (to confession) more," said Steven, from Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Brockport.

Sean likewise said he plans to receive the sacrament of reconciliation more frequently, saying, "I kind of realize it doesn't matter what age you're at. You need to be forgiven; you kind of owe it to God."

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