

Fast sparks new views of Christmas

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

SPENCERPORT — "Let's go, juice break," Barb Legere instructed. Quickly, a reply came back: "I don't want juice, I want food!"

You would likely feel the same if you'd just gone nearly 24 hours without eating, which was the case for numerous youths on Saturday afternoon, Dec. 14. In place of meals, participants focused on world hunger, poverty and the meaning of Christmas during a food fast that had begun at 6 p.m. the previous evening.

Held at St. John the Evangelist's parish center, the event drew 19 junior-high students along with 11 senior-high youths who served as peer leaders. Drinks were the sole nourishment offered during the fast, and some people even refrained from juice in favor of water only.

Legere, the parish's youth minister, said the junior-high group responded well to the challenge. Sean Peck, 12, noted that "since we had a lot of things to do and kept busy, we really didn't feel hungry much. I had a lot of fun."

Katie Hull, a peer leader, had attended a similar event last year for the parish's high-school youth group. She said food fasts are excellent group activities, observing, "I liked the fact everybody has something they're working for together. They're all struggling, so it gives you a chance to bond."

Activities at the Dec. 13-14 food fast were designed to provoke reflection. One skit offered differing perspectives on possessions between a rich woman and a poor woman, and a group exercise illustrated the imbalance of wealth in the world based on governmental decisions and the availability of natural resources.

Christmas was a prevailing theme during the weekend. In one instance, a man wished people a Merry Christmas only to find out that they had lost jobs, were missing loved ones or were lonely. Then, as one of the fast's final activities, a meditation led youths to listen to the "innkeeper" who grudgingly gave Joseph and Mary space in a stable but had a conversion experience when he realized that Jesus was being born. That depiction of Christmas stood in stark contrast to another exercise from the food fast, in which television commercials were found to contain one consistent holiday message — spend money on presents. To punc-



Jason Rearick/Catholic Courier

Casey Bleier (center) and Sidney Cammilleri (right), both 12, participate in a "Priorities in the Global Village" simulation during the food fast at Spencerport's St. John the Evangelist Parish Dec. 15.

uate this point, Legere revealed a T-shirt sold at a department store that states "Christmas is for giving — so gimme, gimme, gimme."

By the time the fast was over, Sidney Cammilleri said her view of Christmas had changed. "I understand it's not about what you get," said Sidney, 12. Katie, 18, added that worry and stress over Christmas gifts "isn't what's important. There are so many more aspects than getting something."

To stay focused on what's important, a framed picture of 12-year-old Franklin Mpuria was kept on display throughout the fast. Franklin resides in Kenya, in a mud hut with 12 brothers and sisters. Facing a constant struggle to meet his basic needs, he is able to attend school only through the ongoing sponsorship of St. John the Evangelist Parish. Legere said that each food-fast participant was asked to bring \$10 to go toward supporting Franklin.

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said she had daydreamed on Saturday afternoon about her favorite foods — "pizza and McDonald's."

Yet Sidney also left the retreat with a new-found appreciation of those foods. "It's so hard for us to go 24 hours (without food). But sometimes (people have) got to go weeks without eating hardly at all," she said.

The fast ended with participants attending St. John the Evangelist's regularly scheduled 5 p.m. Mass. From there? Dinner, naturally. Sean said he planned to visit Don Pablo's with his family, whereas Sidney

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