

Retreat rocks junior-high students

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

WAYLAND — Perhaps there are crowds where you don't feel you fit in, or aren't made to feel welcome. Yet isn't it nice when you realize how many groups value your company — family, friends, youth group, athletic teams, school clubs?

"There are lots of people who want to include us in their daily lives; and that we want to include in our lives," Jennifer Chaffer, youth minister at St. Mary's Parish in Honeoye, told a small group of young Catholics on Feb. 1.

Above all, the 40 youths in grades 6-8 who attended "The Rock" were reminded that they're eternal members in the most important group of all — God's group. "It's a simple message. God loves them and they belong, and we want them," said Sue Versluys, diocesan youth-ministry program specialist. After a pause, she added, "We need them."

"The Rock," a new offering by the diocesan Office of Youth Ministry, made its debut at St. Joseph's School in Wayland. The one-day retreat was conducted by adult and teen staffers who led fun exercises, prayer, witness talks and small-group sharings.

In Chaffer's small group, a spirited discussion was held about belonging, and the reality that certain social groups can be hurtful and make people feel unwanted. But Lauren Heiman, 11, said the talk made her appreciate the people who do welcome her.

"There are a lot of other groups I can be in," said Lauren, a sixth-grader at St. Joseph's School, who attends Sacred Heart Parish in Perkinsville.

Caitlin LiMuti, 11, said she has no desire to be a part of what she calls "the perfect people," saying she'd rather be with folks who appreciate her gifts rather than point out her faults. "Then you know you're special in your own way," said Caitlin, who attends St. Agnes Parish in Avon.

Many of the day's activities centered around friends, faith and family. At one point, small groups were asked to make a drawing of a dinner-table gathering involving people who are significant in their lives. This led to talks about relationships with family members.

Another exercise connected candy with faith. For example, "Life Savers" reminded participants that Jesus is our savior while "Almond Joy" conveyed that life is joyful. Then, while taking pieces of candy, youths recited the prayer "Taste



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Teens and preteens from the Diocese of Rochester gather in small groups Feb. 1 at St. Joseph School in Wayland during "The Rock," a new retreat for junior-high students.



and see, God is good." Versluys said these messages will hopefully be reinforced whenever the youths eat those brands of candy in the future.

The day closed with a prayer service where all participants received crosses. A few hours earlier during lunch, an unplanned group prayer had been held when Father Steve Kraus, pastor of Holy Family Catholic Community (St. Joseph's in Wayland, Sacred Heart in Perkinsville, St. Mary's in Dansville and St. Pius V in Cohocton) led a solemn observance of the seven astronauts who were killed that morning aboard the space shuttle Columbia.

"The Rock" got a thumbs-up from Caitlin, who said it was "a lot of fun" and also that "it teaches you lessons." And Benjamin Mark, 13, said that after some initial nervousness, he settled in nicely. "I started to feel a lot more comfortable as soon as I knew more about the people in my group," said Benjamin, from St. Mary's in Dansville.

Feb. 1 was the first of three "The Rock" retreats taking place in different regions of the diocese. The others will be March 15 at St. John the Evangelist in Clyde and April 12 at Church of Christ the King in Irondequoit.

The title "The Rock" was chosen because, according to Versluys, "We wanted something short and creative, that symbolized strength and support and foundation." She said the retreats were created in re-

sponse to a growing plea from parishes to offer more events for junior-high students. "Retreats have always gotten people involved in fun, spirited ways," she said. The junior-high crowd, she remarked, needs something that's "fast-paced with a lot of high impact."

Through "The Rock," Versluys said she hopes that junior-high students will realize they not only belong in their church, but should also become active in such areas as liturgical ministries. "No longer are they supposed to be seen and not heard," Versluys stated.

Versluys added that "The Rock" is a nice lead-in for the annual diocesan Junior High Youth Rally, to be held April 26 at New York Chiropractic College in Seneca Falls. Looking even further down the road, Versluys hopes that these same youths will attend all-weekend diocesan retreats for high schoolers when they're old enough. You can already count in Benjamin, who said he's considering a high-school retreat next year.

"I think I would like to try it. I'm willing to try anything," he remarked.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Openings are available for both remaining "The Rock" retreats, as well as for the diocesan Junior High Youth Rally. To register or for more details, call 585/328-3228, ext. 1279, or outside Monroe County at 800/388-7177, ext. 1279.

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