

Fest blends music, strong messages

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — Exuberant spirit was abundant at the first-ever diocesan Urban FaithFest May 31, as young people filled the air with joyful singing, dancing and shouting to celebrate their Catholic faith.

Yet one part of the day kept participants rooted to their chairs. While dramatic music blared, video depictions of a groaning, blood-drenched Jesus Christ filled a large screen. Sal Solo, the singer/narrator, told the audience that this imagery served as a jarring reminder that Jesus died for our sins.

The graphic presentation of Christ's passion had a profound effect on Julius Durant. "It really showed how much love he had for us, and what he was willing to do for us," said Julius, 13, who attends St. Michael's Parish in Rochester.

Solo starred in the 1980s as a vocalist for the British band Classix Nouveaux. However, he left pop music behind in favor of promoting his Catholic faith through musical performances backed by dazzling video accompaniment. "There is nothing in the world I'd rather do than be with you," Solo said to the FaithFest crowd during his afternoon presentation.

Unfortunately, Solo said, Christian beliefs and MTV air play are two separate worlds. He was blunt in his assessment of violence and sex in the media, asking young FaithFest participants not to idolize such artists as Eminem "who can sing about murdering and raping his mother — and that's suitable."

Solo's message hit home with Vanessa Morales, 15. "It makes me think a lot about how I need to break down a barrier keeping me away from God," said Vanessa, a parishioner at Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier in Rochester. "TV and radio are not helping at all."

Lynette DeJesus, diocesan coordinator of urban youth ministry, applauded Solo's strong words, saying, "I love that. The kids need to hear it like that." DeJesus said she had become interested in bringing Solo to Rochester after seeing him perform last summer at World Youth Day in Toronto.

The Urban FaithFest, held on the campus of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, was attended by approximately 100 youths and adult chaperones, mainly from Rochester city churches as well as from other diocesan parishes. Also included in the festival's afternoon lineup were multicultural performances and faith-related discussion sessions.



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Sal Solo performs for the young people who participated in the first-ever diocesan Urban FaithFest at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School May 31.

Following dinner, participants engaged in a reconciliation service before ending the festival on an energetic note with a two-hour dance.

Julius said he's happy that the Rochester Diocese tailored an event specifically for urban youths. "It tries and get people off the street, and more in touch with their faith," he commented.

One notable FaithFest participant was Bishop Matthew H. Clark, who spent much of the day clapping his hands to music and greeting participants. At one point, he even took the stage as a volunteer percussionist.

"I'm so happy this (festival) is happening," Bishop Clark exclaimed, seconds before exchanging a hug with Julius — whom he had just confirmed three nights earlier.

In his introductory remarks, Bishop Clark recalled that when he visited South America many years ago, some of the friendliest people he met were teenagers in Chile. "They were tremendously generous, hospitable and caring for a stranger in their midst," he remarked, stating his confidence that youths attending the FaithFest possess those same qualities.

Solo, meanwhile, cited Mary the mother of Jesus — through her acceptance of God's will — as the ideal teen for other youths to emulate.

"A young girl, age 14 or 15, was willing to make a difference. A teenaged girl, just like many of you here, wanted to change the world," he said.



Bishop Matthew H. Clark plays percussion with the Bata con Pies band as Marianna Scott performs a Latin dance.



Michael Cherry performs with the Joseph C. Wilson Step Team.

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