

NCYC draws droves

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

"Feelings of amazement" is how Ashley Smart, 17, describes worshipping with several thousand other teenagers.

"It was almost as if we could feel the presence of God inside each one of us. Nobody was worried about feeling out of place or self-conscious," said Ashley, a parishioner in the Northern Cayuga Cluster, in recalling the final Mass at the 2001 National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis that drew an estimated 25,000 people.

This week Ashley is bound to get those same feelings, when the NCYC — which is held every two years — descends upon Houston Nov. 13-16. Once again, the Diocese of Rochester is playing a major role in creating big numbers.

According to Michael Theisen, diocesan director of youth ministry, approximately 850 people — 600 high-schoolers along with adult chaperons and young-adult assistants — are representing Rochester. This includes more than 50 parish groups from all sections of the diocese. As was the case in 2001, Rochester has the highest diocesan or archdiocesan coalition in the country other than the host city.

Theisen said local NCYC interest stems from viewing the conference not simply as a four-day event, but



Leila Navidi/Catholic Courier

At the end of Mass Nov. 9, parishioners of Irondequoit's Christ the King Parish reach out their hands to bless youths who will travel to Houston to attend the National Catholic Youth Conference. Sixteen-year-old Nate Sheridan (center) receives a blessing from family and friends, including his mother, Patty (left), and his brother, Josh (right).

as a key component in an ongoing faith journey. He also credited parishes for lending strong support, especially with fundraising efforts.

Stephen Lesniak, from Church of the Epiphany in Sodus, said his youth group has been working hard to raise NCYC money. "We had breakfasts, we sold cider, we sold flowers. We had a jar for pennies and then we rolled them," said

Stephen, 18. Corey Ginett, youth minister, said the youth group has raised \$10,000, enabling 15 youths and four adults to go to Houston — impressive numbers, she noted, for a fairly small parish.

The largest parish NCYC contingent is from Irondequoit's Christ the King, which is bringing 42 youths and 15 adults. Keegan Brown, a second-time NCYC attendee, said these numbers reflect a strong overall youth-ministry program at her parish.

"Kids are always talking about how much they enjoy it on Sundays, and that draws kids to come to our weekly meetings. They then turn into regulars participating in larger events," observed Keegan, 17.

Also helping to promote NCYC participation is Bishop Matthew H. Clark, who gave the homily at the closing Mass in Indianapolis and serves as the U.S. bishops' episcopal liaison to the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. Bishop Clark is joining the diocesan group in Houston and will take part in the NCYC's Youth Congress that will center on social justice.

The 2003 conference theme is "River of Life." Other NCYC highlights will include keynote speakers, workshops, music, worship and recreational events. All in all, teens have numerous chances to make new friends from other parts of the



diocese, as well as the country.

"I remember (in 2001) a kid from Florida came up to me and taught me how to swing dance," Keegan said. "I like all of the acceptance, openness and everyone talking with everyone."

Stephen said he, also, has fond memories of Indianapolis. "Just the atmosphere — it was very pleasant. Nobody seemed overstressed, there was no anxiety," he said.

"Being from such a small church I had never experienced anything like it," added Ashley, whose cluster includes St. John's in Port Byron, St. Joseph's in Weedsport and St. Patrick's in Cato. "Even though I didn't know most of these people, there was an incredible feeling of unity because we all knew we were there for the same reason — to share in celebrating our faith in God. The trip wasn't what your normal teenager would classify as 'some boring church thing.'"

Ashley, who is among nine youths and three adults traveling from Northern Cayuga, also said that words alone can't give a full scope of the NCYC experience.

"You have to be there to truly understand it," she said.

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