

Rally scores with junior-high crowd

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

SENECA FALLS — Young Matthew Clark's debut as an altar server was a bumpy one. A fellow server pulled an unexpected no-show, and Matthew — shaken by the prospect of going it alone — forgot most of what he had been trained to do.

Despite this mishap, Matthew hasn't done too badly in his life of church service: He has been bishop of the Rochester Diocese for 25 years. Bishop Clark recalled the altar-serving incident May 1 while encouraging youths to shrug off awkwardness and get involved with their faith.

"When we respond to God, it doesn't always go perfectly," he said.

These reflections came during Mass at the 12th annual diocesan Junior High Youth Rally, held at New York Chiropractic College. The rally was attended by approximately 325 young people in grades 6-8.

Opening activities for the daylong program were provided by the Diocesan Youth Committee in the form of games, icebreakers and inspirational talks. In one segment, participants discussed the spiritual aspects of such movies as "Finding Nemo," "The Lion King" and "Lord of the Rings."

Bishop Clark then gave an opening address, encouraging youths from different parts of the diocese to get to know each other. Later, dur-

Youth

ing Mass, he asked young people to pray every day — even if only for a couple of minutes — and to attend church every Sunday.

"God knows us all by name and calls us to be all we can be," the bishop said.

Other rally highlights included dinner and small-group sharing after Mass, plus a "Holy Hullabaloo" — volleyball, basketball, swimming, karaoke and other activities that took place in the afternoon and evening.

The rally's festive spirit was enhanced by some impressive junior-high musicians from Guardian Angels Parish in Henrietta. "By the time they're high-schoolers, they're going to be incredible," remarked Gina Jennison, youth minister at Guardian Angels.

Joshua Condon, the group's adept keyboard player, said he worked up quite a sweat while performing at Mass. "I'm really looking forward to going swimming," stated Joshua, 12.

Bishop Clark appeared to enjoy himself, clapping his hands to the music and also mingling with youths during other portions of the rally, decked out in a T-shirt and shorts.

"I always feel energized, enriched and excited when I spend time with the kids," Bishop Clark said.

The feeling seemed mutual for St.



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Fourteen-year-old Molly Muszak (left) and 13-year-old Nicole Staie, parishioners of Henrietta's Guardian Angels Church, act out a game May 1 called "Elves, Giants & Wizards" during the Junior High Youth Rally at New York State Chiropractic College in Seneca Falls.

Mary's Parish in Honeoye, whose youths eagerly crowded around the bishop. "I think it's wonderful he came to do this awesome event," said St. Mary's Jessica Dobbertin, 11. "It was very nice he took some time off," agreed Melissa Young, 13, also from St. Mary's.

Ali Dean, 12, of St. Mary Magdalene in Wolcott, said the bishop's appearance factored strongly in her decision to attend the Junior High Rally. "I thought this was a once-in-a-lifetime thing," she said. Yet despite the bishop's high stature, St. Mary Magdalene's Anna Interlichia was more impressed by his down-to-earth style: "I think he comes across as fun."

According to event coordinator Sue Versluys, this year's total attendance represented a rise of approximately 75 over last year. Versluys, who serves as program specialist for the diocesan Office of Youth Ministry, cited success of "The Rock" — a series of one-day regional retreats held throughout the year — for fueling interest in the Junior High Rally.



Bishop Clark addresses rally participants.

On the other hand, Bishop Clark noted that for some, the rally marked a first-time experience at a large youth gathering. Yet he observed that "once they get over their initial shyness, they're very enthusiastic about sharing the day with their peers."

Bishop Clark hopes that rally attendees will become further involved in diocesan junior-high and high-school programs. "Thanks be to God — if they want, we can offer them wonderful opportunities all through school," he said.

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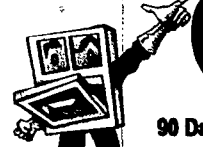
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