

# Youths' service projects flourish

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

## Youth

When is an empty shoe box more valuable than one containing the latest and greatest style?

When the box is refilled with necessities that help poor kids. That's what Emily West, 14, did by recently taking part in Operation Christmas Child at St. Margaret Mary Church in Apalachin.

Operation Christmas Child is an international ecumenical effort that sends toys, school supplies, hygiene items and other gifts to children in other countries. Emily's church contributed items in October and November that were put in shoe boxes by parish youths, wrapped and shipped to their overseas recipients.

"It was really hard to believe that they didn't have this stuff," said Emily, who has done past Operation Christmas Child projects as well. "It changed my perspective almost completely."

Serving those in need at Christmas has been a priority for many additional young people in the diocese. At St. Jerome's Parish in East Rochester, religious-education students are staging a toy drive where donations are passed along to the East Rochester Fire Department, which in turn distributes the gifts to needy families in the village.

"(The students are) very eager to do things to help out. We've sort of been encouraging this, that there are kids who aren't as fortunate as they

are," said Terry Flanigan, St. Jerome's faith-formation coordinator.

One town over from East Rochester, religious-education students at Fairport's Church of the Assumption are conducting their annual Advent shoe box activity. Similar in nature to Operation Christmas Child, the effort provides items for children at local shelters. Students will gather Dec. 13 to prepare the boxes as well as conduct a reflection on "why we give, and what these gifts will mean to those who receive them," said Cathy Tocci, religious-education director.

At Greece's Holy Name of Jesus Parish, youth-group members are again delivering Christmas plants and gifts to shut-in parishioners. The youths, accompanied by family members, present the gifts in person.

Anne Casey, Holy Name's youth minister, stated that the experience can carry long-lasting significance for the young, saying, "This really opens up the kids' eyes about how they can bring Christ to others."

Back in the Southern Tier, Lisa Rustici, sacramental-preparation administrator at Elmira's Our Lady of Lourdes, echoes Casey's sentiments about the value of youth service. She



Rick Bacmanski

Members of the youth group at St. Margaret Mary Church in Apalachin gathered Nov. 14 to pack shoe boxes of Christmas gifts for the needy as part of an international ecumenical effort called Operation Christmas Child. Laura Dragon (left) and Corinne Grenier write Christmas greetings to accompany the gifts.

noted that many young parishioners are involved in Operation Christmas Child at Lourdes, as well as with the parish's annual Christmas-basket project that provides food, clothing and gifts for local families.

"One of the best things you can do for your teen is to give them an unselfish heart," Rustici said. "It's amazing how they step up to the plate when they're given that opportunity."

Ithaca's Immaculate Conception School also has immersed itself in Operation Christmas Child this year. Gifts were due to be packaged and wrapped in mid-November, with a prayer service to follow before the shoe boxes were shipped off.

Deacon Dan Hurley, principal, said this was the first Operation Christmas Child to be conducted at his school. He acknowledged that the

spirit of giving is a good reminder for an age group that often is more geared toward receiving at Christmas.

"They'll know that some other kid is going to open this up. And that's important," Deacon Hurley said.

At St. Margaret Mary in Apalachin, Sue White, youth minister, noted several other current Christmas service projects involving her parish's youths: making cards and baking cookies for shut-ins; writing cards to men and women who are serving in the armed forces; and bringing in candy bars to donate to local youths through Tioga County Rural Ministry.

White said she's impressed by the young people's enthusiasm and sense of caring, such as in the writing of personal notes to Operation Christmas Child recipients. Such was the case for Emily, who once received a letter of thanks from an 8-year-old Jamaican girl. "It makes you feel really good that you helped someone," she said.

Whether she hears from the recipients or not, Emily said she will continue to eagerly write letters.

"I put 'Merry Christmas,'" she said. "And I always say 'I love you.'"

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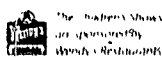
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