

Youth: They have an idea about faith

Catholic teens deepen their knowledge of God at Religious Education Congress Youth Day.

By Michelle Gahee
STAFF WRITER

You might think you know Catholic youths but you have no idea — no idea of the spirit, enthusiasm and joy for worshipping the Lord that the 12,600 young people attending Youth Day at the 2004 Religious Education Congress brought to the Anaheim Convention Center on Feb. 19.

In a pep rally like atmosphere, St. Joseph High School (Lake-wood) students Erin Schaadt and Kathleen Brennan pumped the crowd up for the morning liturgy presided over by Cardinal Mahony.

Chants of “We love Jesus, yes we do. We love Jesus. How about you?” moved from section to section of the packed arena as alternative rock Christian music rocked the room.

“It’s really nice to share our enthusiasm for God’s love with everyone,” said Brennan who organized the call to worship along with her St. Joseph classmates. “There is an awesome sense of connection and feeling God’s love.”

The liturgy opened with a video montage of people from all walks of life speaking the truth of their lives, using the “if you really knew me” theme of this year’s conference. One clip showed a high school student saying, “If you really knew me...you’d know that although I’ve gone to Catholic school all my life, I’m really Jewish.” Another clip showed a young boy explaining how those who really know him know how much it hurts to be made fun of.

As Cardinal Mahony processed to the altar he was greeted by cheers normally reserved for rock stars, with flashing lights and loud music. Even the assembled clergy got into the moment clapping and swaying along with the music.

“To see everyone here worshipping God and having a good



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time is an awesome experience,” said first-time attendee Alex Ketell of St. Lawrence Church in San Jose.

Two students invited by Cardinal Mahony to join him in giving the homily both spoke of times of uncertainty in their lives and their religious beliefs.

Carolyn Manalac, 17, of St. Linus Church in Norwalk and a junior at St. Joseph High School, shared a story of a disagreement with her mother that left her with a lot of “what ifs.”

“I was worried. Was she really mad at me? Would she forgive me? What if something happens to her like a car accident? Would I ever see her again?” said Manalac. “When reflecting on the Gospels today, it is easy to see that Jesus perhaps worried about

his future, his relationships and his own destiny.”

Jeff Akkerman, 17, of Blessed Junipero Serra Church in Camarillo, spoke of the time his belief in God was shaken by the serious illness of a member of his church.

“How could my God of love and mercy be so heartless to take this beautiful child’s mother away from him? How could he justify tearing apart this family,” asked Akkerman. “I learned that God’s plan for us is shrouded in mystery and that he teaches us through our difficulties.”

Always remember that you are never alone, said Cardinal Mahony, and remember that “it is Jesus Christ that gives us the strength to face our difficulties.... The lesson of our Scriptures to-

day is we have to walk each day in the love and mercy of God. And we must be courageous and realize that Jesus walks with us. Regardless of what happens each day, we must be about mending our relationships and live each day as if it was our last day.”

Workshop presenter Colette Kennett wove the theme of living fully throughout her presentation, “Pay it Forward.” Kennett urged students to become actively involved in life and spread God’s blessings every day.

“Maybe you think that you don’t make a difference in the world but I am here to tell you that you do make a difference. You are young and gifted beyond measure,” said Kennett. “Remember Jesus did the biggest ‘pay it forward’ of all — he died for us.”

In this very interactive workshop, everyone in the room made at least two or three new friends before it was over.

“It’s great to be here and have my beliefs reinforced,” said Tim Freeman, 15, of Blessed Junipero Serra Church in Quartz Hills. “It’s great that all these people are here willing to help us with our lives.”

“This conference has made such a huge impact on me,” said Sean Mascarinas of St. Francis



Youth Day participants sway to the music during the day’s closing rally.

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Catholic youths packed the Anaheim Convention Center during the Youth Day liturgy.

Church in Bakersfield. “It was amazing when I walked into Mass in the arena and saw everyone so into worshipping God.”

Another well-attended workshop was led by the Chicago-based theater troupe Healthworks, which presents skits dealing with such critical issues as HIV/AIDS prevention, youth violence and drug and alcohol abuse.

Students in the audience were riveted as the young performers portrayed two teens locked in an abusive relationship. Removing yourself from the relationship may be difficult, they told the audience, but “you are too good to be forever somebody’s fool.”

The audience related to the group’s use of humor, drama, song and dance to challenge teens to make positive choices regarding their health and smart social decisions.

“We’re here to choose peace. You don’t have to choose sadness just because of all the violence going on around us,” they said. “Protect and respect yourself ‘cause that’s what’s what.”

The day concluded with Congress’ version of MTV’s “Total Request Live” show. Singer Matt Maher gave a moving acoustic guitar performance that brought the entire arena crowd to its feet.

He was followed by a video presentation of “Cribs” featuring a humorous tour of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels (Cardinal Mahony’s “crib”), led by Father Paul Albee that included the cardinal’s vestment room and the Cathedral Mausoleum.

Ending the day, popular inspirational speaker Mark Hart told the youths not to be afraid to take chances in life.

“Listen twice as much as you talk and don’t be afraid to fail,” he said. “Spirituality is not about perfection but about connection.” ❖



Actors with the Healthworks theater troupe present a skit dealing with abusive relationships.

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Participants in the “Pay It Forward” workshop get to know each other.

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Alex Ketell (left), Erin Schaadt and Kathleen Brennan get ready to participate in the Youth Day liturgy.



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