

Junior high students focus on the real riches

Written by Christina Lee Knauss | The Catholic Miscellany
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WHITE OAK—You won't find lasting value in material things like the latest trendy clothes, or the gone-tomorrow social achievements like being the most popular kid in class. The only lasting worth comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ and living out your beliefs.

That was the core message for more than 700 junior high students who spent a crisp fall Saturday at White Oak Conference Center for a rally sponsored by the Office of Youth and Young Adults Ministry.

The rally's theme was "Treasure Hunt: The Search for Eternal Treasure," and focused on the Scripture: "For your heart will always be where your riches are" (Mt 6:21).

The rally featured plenty of time for fun, skits, games and sing-alongs led by Shannon Cerneka and Orin Johnson, the day's keynote speakers.

The men run Missouri-based Oddwalk Ministries, which combines music and humor with down-to-earth talks on living as an authentic Catholic. Their goal is to help young people overcome the challenges and pressures of daily life.

Johnson told stories about growing up Catholic in the small town of Tyler, Minn. He said once when he was about four years old, he learned the prayer "Here I am Lord, I come to do your will!" and repeatedly shouted it at the sky, and then was disappointed he didn't get an immediate answer from God.

It was only later, he said, that he learned God answered him and was present to him constantly through the sacraments he received.

"Through our baptism, through the Eucharist, something divine comes to live within us," he said. "God is there within us, God is here with us today. All of us are created to be temples of the Holy Spirit, and as mysterious as it is to think about it, we carry God in our hearts."

Cerneka and Johnson based several of their talks on the theme of hidden treasure, and how Jesus reveals himself as the true treasure through the Eucharist and Scripture.

They also told the participants that God often reveals his gifts to them in unanticipated ways

The young people divided into groups to discuss peer pressure, relationships, and how God's love can help them discover their true self-worth, free from the world's judgment.

The afternoon session had time for prayer. Father Jeffrey F. Kirby, vicar for vocations, celebrated Mass.

Girls attended a talk led by three young women from the diocesan evangelization group, the E Team. They talked about the pain of losing friends and being put down by peers, and said a relationship with Christ can help girls focus on their self-worth even when others hurt them.

The talks also focused on the painful reality of verbal bullying.

Mary Hudacko, a member of Our Lady of the Hills Church in Columbia, told the girls that verbal insults could be as painful as a physical injury.

"When you tear someone down, you're tearing Christ down," she said.

Father Kirby led a session for young men that focused on the power of words, and how to use the gift of language in a Christian way.

"Calling people names, gossiping, criticizing ... that is a total abuse of the power of words," Father Kirby said. "So many people are destroyed by the power of words. We need to take seriously the power of speech, and the power of the word. We can use our tongues to do a lot of damage, or we can use true Christian speech, which means encouragement."

Daisy Lopez, 12, from St. Mary Help of Christians Church in Aiken, said it was the first youth rally she'd attended, and the day left her with a great deal to think about.

"I've learned that love, especially God's love, is very important," she said. "Even though there are days where I might not think I'm pretty or special, God always does."

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