



Diocesan Youth Council members Victoria Perez (left) and Kenzie Widener, both from Our Lady of Sorrows in South Haven, laugh while entertaining the audience Oct. 30 during the annual Grásta Dé retreat at Andrean High School. (Michael McArdle photo)



(Michael McArdle photo/NWI Catholic)

Grásta Dé, diocesan middle school retreat, challenges youth to change the world

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MERRILLVILLE — Ask young people how they see God's grace and they'll mention their parents, friends, other youth and adults, and the simple things in life.

Diocesan Youth Council

members shared those thoughts at the fifth annual Grásta Dé, the diocesan middle school retreat, held at Andrean High School, Oct. 30. Gaelic for God's grace, Grásta Dé brought together 300 youth and adults from 20 parishes in Lake, Porter, and LaPorte counties.

The Sunday afternoon program featured music, learning sessions, a concert and keynote by Oddwalk Ministries, Mass with Bishop Dale J. Melczek, and social time.

For Mike Zak, a youth minister from St. Patrick Parish in St. Charles, Ill., God's grace includes

Moses and Jesus. He discussed those two figures in his breakout session with seventh-graders. God's grace, he said, is reflected in the "I am" statements made by God to Moses in the Old Testament and Jesus to his followers in

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John's Gospel.

"Jesus wanted to have a relationship by revealing himself to us," Zak said.

Sal Solo, a former British rock star whose tune is now spiritual, posed these questions to eighth-graders: Are you a Christian? How will the world know?

In discussing confirmation, Solo said the sacrament is not the end of young people's faith training but only the "beginning of your real freedom." Likening confirmation to an airline reservation, Solo said that the confirmandi, in facing the bishop, are asking God "to confirm your faith, to confirm your place in heaven."

Noting that each eighth-grader is unique, Solo said, "You have a purpose in life. You have a reason to be here. It's important that you embrace your Catholic faith. It's God's will."

Exploring the sacraments, Solo admitted that not all people who receive confirmation will be changed. "The problem lies with a person who does not allow the Holy Spirit to work in him or does not understand who they are receiving," he said.

While many young people may see the Church as

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boring, Solo stressed that youth need their faith to grow as they mature. He reminded them that the Church is not brick and mortar but people — people who "want the world to be a better place for all."

Solo continued, "The Church is only as good as the people who are willing to be there for you. Are you willing to be there for them? My prayer is that you get a little better understanding of the sacraments. When you are confirmed, you are going to be changed and you are going to change the world."

In their keynote address, Shannon Cerneka and Orin Johnson of Oddwalk Ministries focused on one sentence: "Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will." Founded in 2004, Oddwalk uses upbeat and light-hearted music and witness to help their audiences embrace life as Eucharistic people.

Johnson, who grew up in Minnesota, recalled at age 4 seeing a stick figure of

someone with arms raised and that sentence. At the time he realized that God was trying to speak to him, but he never got the response he expected.

Today that sentence "means something different to me," he said, citing a Christian community always surrounding him. "Look around you. Look with different eyes at the hearts and souls of people in your community. Look at people with the eyes of God.

"Sometimes we have to be the answers to someone else's prayers."

Cerneka, the father of three, recalled that passage in Luke 18 in which Jesus encouraged the apostles to let the children come to him. Children have no power, no influence, and as such they rely on adults for everything.

As with children, Cerneka said, "Give up all the things that mean something to us for Jesus. When God calls, be willing to say, 'Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will.'"