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800 teens become Catholic to the Core

By **RENEE WEBB**, *Globe* editor
Nov. 2, 2006

LE MARS - Catholic to the Core was the theme of the 2006 Diocesan Youth Rally that drew close to 800 high school students from across the Diocese of Sioux City.



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The rally was held on Oct. 29 at Gehlen High School in Le Mars.

According to Jessica La Fleur, diocesan director of youth ministry, more than 40 parishes/clusters and Catholic schools were represented.

"I think it went really well. I was very pleased," she said.

Following an opening skit by Gehlen students and opening prayer by the God Squad youth group from Christ the King in Sioux City, Mass was celebrated by Bishop R. Walker Nickless.



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In opening comments at the liturgy, the bishop told those gathered that they not only were the future of the church but he stressed that they are the church of the present.



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Five priests concelebrated Mass with the bishop - Father Richard Ball, Father Kevin Richter, Father Brian Hughes, Father Dan Greving, Father Roger Linnan and Father Brad Pelzel. Tim Murphy of Carroll was the deacon of the Mass.

During the homily, the bishop pointed out that the date of this rally was appropriate as it fell on World Youth Day as was marked by all dioceses in this country. Again he told them they were the church of today.

"We want to honor you, affirm you and help you realize the greatness to which

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you have right now - to make a great witness of your faith," said Bishop Nickless.

He reminded them that Halloween was the first anniversary of the "scary call" regarding his appointment as bishop of Sioux City. As bishop, he noted, he has had many wonderful experiences including confirmations. Bishop Nickless asked the teens to raise their hands if they had been confirmed by him and then asked those to raise their hands if they were slated for confirmation.

For those who had been confirmed, he said they should know that he liked to ask the youth about the readings. Keeping with that tradition, he asked for a volunteer to tell him about the readings. In the first reading, Jeremiah 31:7-9, the bishop pointed out it shows God cares about his people. When people wander away from God through sinning, God wants to take them back. The second reading, Hebrews 5:1-6, centered on Jesus as the high priest. The Gospel, Mark 10:46-52, focused on Bartimaeus who was blind and asked Jesus to help him see.

"All of the readings today speak about compassion. Compassion is caring about others. In all three readings we can see that God cares for us," said Bishop Nickless.

He told a true story of a 15-year-old named Doug who was diagnosed with leukemia. When he was in pain and feeling badly in the hospital one day, he asked why there were no flowers. His aunt ordered him a flower arrangement stating that her nephew had just been diagnosed with leukemia.

It so happened that the young woman who took the order for the flowers previously had leukemia. She placed a note with the flowers to accompany one from the aunt.

"She took time to care. That flower arrangement and that little note from Laura made all the difference in the world," said Bishop Nickless. "All of us need to learn that lesson of compassion. We need to do something for one another."

He referred back to the Gospel reading when Jesus took the time to stop and listen to Bartimaeus and answered his desire for sight.

"We have to have the courage to do the right things," said the bishop. At a time when many things are vying for their attention, when they seek to be popular and have opportunities to get involved with sex, drugs and drinking, he reminded them that God calls them and wants to give them happiness that will last.

With hard choices, said Bishop Nickless, come great rewards.

"I want to congratulate and thank all of you for being here today," he said. "You are a great sign of hope."

As the liturgy drew to a close, Jessica LaFleur announced the recipients of the Diocesan Youth Ministry Awards. The youth recipient was Tyler Coleman of St. Joseph Parish in Milford. The adult recipient was Pat McCall of St. Cecelia Church in Algona.

The keynote presentation was delivered by Shannon Cerneka and Orin Johnson of Oddwalk Ministries. They pointed out that their ministries centered on community, participation and mission. The two men used music and personal stories to inspire and teach about the faith.

Johnson told them a story from his childhood and reminded them that God is calling them to a childlike faith.

They centered part of their message on what it means to be Catholic to the Core. Cerneka asked for qualities that you might find in a strong Catholic. The youth responded with prayer, courage, compassion, determination, faith, love, belief in God and hope.

He reminded them, however, that there are things that are unique to Catholics such as Mass, the rosary, devotion to Mary and Catholic social teaching.

"I would ask you today to embrace those things," said Cerneka. "The celebration of the liturgy is the source and summit of our faith as Catholics."

He told them that they shouldn't expect the church to entertain them at Mass. They should attend Mass with the attitude that they are giving themselves to God.

"Don't go to Mass expecting to get something, go to Mass expecting to give everything," said Cerneka. "When you go to Mass expecting to give everything, you will receive blessings, you will receive grace."

Orin told another story from his childhood. He spoke about scars and mentioned that scars by nature are violent and bring back painful moments.

During the liturgy, he said the priest breaks the bread as a sign that Jesus was broken for people's sins. The next time they went to Mass, he urged them to really mean it when they sang Lamb of God.

Just as the bread was transformed into Christ at Mass, Johnson said their job was to be transformed, changed by the rally so that they could share their faith with others.

They closed the keynote with a sung prayer, We Will Go Lord.

Following the keynote presentation, youth had the opportunity to participate in two of the more than 20 workshops offered on topics ranging from Bible trivia, to Christ's passion, body image, dating and more.

The rally received positive feedback from the youth.

"I thought the Mass was a really great experience - a whole bunch of kids, Catholic kids - praying together and singing together," said Ellen Dougherty, a parishioner at Immaculate Conception in Merville.

Jack Riesenber, a parishioner at West Bend, found the keynote presentation to be interesting. This was his first rally and he thought he'd go again.

It was also the first rally for Kylee Kunkel of the Hartley/Sanborn cluster.

"I thought it was really inspiring. I think people will look at God different, go to church more, think about Christ more, keep him in their minds and become better Catholics," she said.

After the workshops, the youth enjoyed pizza and a Christian music concert by Heath McNease and SevenGlory.

LaFleur mentioned that the concerts were offered for the first time this year and they appeared to be well received.

"I thought the bishop's homily was perfect and it started the day off on a wonderful note," she said.

During the rally, she extended gratitude to Gehlen and the volunteers who helped to make the day a success.