

## Hundreds of Catholic teens gather in Waco

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More than 800 Catholic youth representing some 50 parishes in the Austin Diocese came to the Waco Convention Center on Jan. 5-7 to pray, sing, dance and reflect on what it means to be Catholic. Billed as "The Crowd or the Cross," the 49th annual Diocesan Youth Ministry Conference proved a popular draw for participants.

"My first time at DCYC was pretty awesome," said John Cancino, a high school senior who attended the conference with a group from Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Austin. "Being able to be exposed to the teens from the different churches in our diocese and being able to party with them was great."

Participants were high school students, from grades nine through 12, said Arthur Canales, director of the Office of Youth Ministry for the diocese. Most came with parish youth groups, some were from Catholic high schools and parents brought some youngsters whose parish does not have a youth group.

"You have a choice to follow the cross of Christ or the crowd; do you want to follow society or the Scriptures?" Canales said of the conference's theme, decided by the eight-member Conference Planning Committee.

Committee members include Canales, Diana Pisana, Jeffrey Lopez, Erik Diaz, Marlene Lopez, Logan Mayes, Connie Austin and Frances Busbey.

The committee's choice of conference topics and speakers sought to deepen participants' "faith life in Jesus and to come to experience their Catholicism in a deeper faith" added Canales.

"I think my favorite part was when Father Jayme Mathias got up and gave his talk. It was really amazing; it was the best speech I have ever heard and I wish I could hear it again or witness something like it," said Alex de la Garza, an 11th grader from Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Conventual Franciscan Friar Jayme Mathias, president of San Juan Diego High School in Austin, presented the homily at the Saturday evening vespers.

Another presentation capturing the teens and their adult chaperones was "My Space: What's All the Fuss," presented by Stephanie Vanelli, an interactive media design major at the Art Institute of Houston. MySpace is an Internet site that has become popular with young people as a social networking tool. It offers an interactive network for friends to submit personal profiles, blogs, groups, photos, music and videos. Its popularity with teens is matched by its notoriety with parents who fear the site can too easily corrupt young minds.

Vanelli asked the youngster in her audience how many were proud of what they post on MySpace. She asked if they would feel comfortable showing their MySpace postings to their parents, grandparents or parish priest. Less than half admitted comfort with sharing their MySpace contents with the adults in their lives.

"When you bring your private life to the public place of the Internet you could expose yourself to trouble," Vanelli told her young audience. She offered advice on protecting their privacy. First, she said, be as anonymous as possible. Second, protect your information. Never go to an in-person meeting. Do not use the same screen name for everything. Most importantly, "be a 24-hour Catholic," she said.

"Make sure your Internet persona represents who you really are," Vanelli said. "Make sure your profile makes your parents and grandparents proud."

The conference was not all serious business.

"My favorite part of the DCYC trip was all of the live music, especially from Oddwalk Ministries. When Orin went all rock star style and when Chris, from Limit 3:16, was bombing on the guitar Jimi Hendrix style!" said Thomas Adams, an 11th grader from Our Lady of Guadalupe.

The Austin Catholic Christian rock group Limit 3:16 provided entertainment throughout the conference. Shannon Cerneka and Orin Johnson of Oddwalk Ministries served as the conference keynote speakers, providing "lots of fun, laughs and humor as they worked the crowd," said Canales.

Other speakers included both local and national talent. Bishop Gregory Aymond celebrated Sunday Mass at the conclusion of the conference.

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