

Baltimore Archdiocese hosts middle school youth day

CLARKSVILLE – Middle school years can be among the most challenging of a young person's life.

"We are at this awkward stage of trying to discover ourselves and, making it even harder, trying to discover the Lord in ourselves," said Mary Gutelius, a 13-year-old seventh-grader at Dunloggin Middle School and a parishioner of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, both in Ellicott City.

"When in middle school, you really are getting to that stage in life where it is essential to be given the information needed to understand God and what it really means to be one of his followers."

Gutelius was among nearly 200 young adolescents who gathered at St. Louis School in Clarksville May 12 to grow in their faith at the first middle-school youth day sponsored by the Archdiocese of Baltimore in more than a decade.

The event was designed to conquer three tasks: to highlight the necessity for middle school ministry, to present a clear message of the Gospel and to allow the middle-schoolers to experience the creativity and diversity of their larger archdiocesan church family.

"Rise Up!" was the day's theme, in reference to the viral video of the song by the same name sung by the Cardinal Shehan School Choir from Baltimore. The choir kicked off the event with a live rendition of the song.

Gutelius said many middle-school students deal with self-consciousness and the struggle of trying to keep up to fit in. Youth ministry and events such as the youth day help students realize those things do not matter in the eyes of God, she said.

"God doesn't care what the bullies at school think of you," Gutelius said, "but rather how in your own unique way you make the world a little better."

Craig Gould, director of the archdiocesan division of youth and young adult ministry, said middle school is “really where we see people making decisions of faith.”

He added that the culture has shifted, and young people are making individual faith decisions early on, rather than automatically falling into the religious traditions of their families.

“There’s more growth in the individual,” Gould said.

Nationally known performers provided entertainment and led worship, including NET Ministries; Corrie Marie, a singer and songwriter who is a parishioner of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Ellicott City; Ike Ndolo, a singer, songwriter and adjunct worship leader at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Tempe, Ariz.; and Paul J. Kim, a beatboxer, singer and speaker.

Kim floated between comedy and beatboxing, prayer and testimonial.

“You don’t have to change go to God, it’s going to God that will change you,” he said. “You don’t have to change and become a perfect person to have a relationship with Christ and the church, so come as you are.”

Breakout sessions included adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, vocation discussions, NET Ministries and service. Inflatable games provided a chance to play outside.

Every parish and Catholic school in the archdiocese received information on the event, and Gould spoke with each principal to encourage attendance especially for students who attend Catholic schools, but who are not active in their parishes.

Lori Stone, youth minister at St. Cecilia in Baltimore, accompanied a group of sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders from the parish. She said the parish’s youth group begins at age 13, so not all of the students had been active prior to this event.

“This was an opportunity for middle-schoolers to get involved,” she said, adding that it was a bonus “to give them an opportunity to experience with the archdiocese has to offer.”

Stone said the event gave the students a chance to bond and to be the focus of the day.

The middle school youth day will be an annual event hosted at different locations throughout the archdiocese. St. Maria Goretti High School in Hagerstown will be next year's host.

Though the event was not specifically gear toward vocations, attending the event were Father Steven Roth, archdiocesan director of vocations; and Sister Lourdes Miranda, vocations director for the Little Sisters of the Poor.

"All youth ministry events encourage vocations in the fullest sense of the word," Gould said, adding that it might be a religious vocation, or living out their lives as disciples in other vocations.

"Being present to young people is an important part of the ministry of a priest to accompany them through a very confusing time in their lives and to show them that the church cares about them and is with them," said Matt Himes, a third-year seminarian at St. Mary's Seminary in Roland Park. "Having a unique opportunity like Rise Up! to encounter Jesus and grow in faith is crucial. ... It allowed the young people to have fun, be themselves and learn about and encounter Jesus in new ways."

UPDATED: *An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported that the middle school youth day was the first for the archdiocese. The event was the first in a decade.*

Email Emily Rosenthal at erosenthal@CatholicReview.org