

# Baltimore pilgrims to NCYC find a young church alive and well

INDIANAPOLIS - When Hannah Turner saw more than 20,000 young people kneeling in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament Nov. 17 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, the experience was eye-opening and inspiring.

Moments earlier, the stadium was filled with the loud, joyous music of Christian hip-hop band TobyMac. Now, not a peep was heard as participants in the national Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) peered intently and silently at a consecrated host held inside a gold monstrance.

“It made me realize that people around you are also broken and fallen,” said Turner, a teen from St. Bernadette in Severn, “and that you are not alone”

The Archdiocese of Baltimore was well represented at the national youth gathering Nov. 16-18, with nearly 250 people from 27 parishes traveling to the event.

The parking lot of St. William of York in Baltimore Nov. 16 was filled with nearly 50 sleepy teenagers, excited chaperones, anxious youth ministers and a large, shiny white bus that would transport them early morning to Indiana. Three other buses left at 5 a.m. from elsewhere in the archdiocese carrying the rest of the Baltimore delegation to the event. Additionally, a youth group from St. Mary Parish in Annapolis flew to Indianapolis.

NCYC is sponsored by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. This year, its theme was, “Called — Llamados,” a reference to Isaiah 43:1 where God calls Jacob by name.

### **‘Are you ready for some Jesus?’**

The pilgrims from Baltimore arrived at the youth gathering after a 12-hour trip from Maryland, with only two stops along the way and a brief break for early dinner. As they walked toward the stadium, Baltimore’s youth groups and others from around the country responded with an explosive “yes!” and applause after someone in the crowd yelled, “Are you ready for some Jesus?”

The doors of the stadium opened at 6:30 p.m. and Christian hip hop and pop artist Toby Mac welcomed the attendants with an astounding show full of lights, rhythm and message. Later, emcees Father Joseph Espailat, founder of the Messengers of Christ Ministry, and Emily Wilson, musician and author, welcomed the crowd by sharing their own personal stories of faith and evangelization. Several other featured artists, such as award-winning musician and producer Matt Maher, performed at NCYC during the general sessions and contributed to the general upbeat, cheerful mood of the gathering.

“Singing together (Matt Maher’s) songs out loud with others, many of my favorite ones, was an amazing experience, ” said A.J. Saquilayen from St. Joseph Parish in Fullerton.

For Lauren Goodwin, also from St. Joseph, a highlight of the conference was her interaction with artist and speaker Paul J. Kim, who “spoke the truth to me.”

### **‘You say there’s no God?’**

Chris Stefanick, an internationally acclaimed author, speaker and founder of Real Life Catholic, used humor and life experience to speak about the reality of who we are and of God’s love for each person Nov. 16.

He spoke of the “love story” upon which the Catholic faith is founded.

“When you remove the love story, what are you left with?” he asked. “Rules that we have to follow. Rituals that we’re not sure why we keep them alive but they take a lot of time. Doctrines that have nothing to do with your life. That’s how the world has come to see Catholicism. ... The world has forgotten the love story, and so often we’ve forgotten the love story.”

That story, he said, “begins very simply with the words ‘(I) believe in one God.’”

So many youths today chose not to believe, he said, including an atheist who once told him that belief that God created the universe “is as stupid as a kid coming down on Christmas morning and, seeing presents under the tree, thinks, ‘There are presents, therefore there must be a Santa..’”

“You say there’s no God?” Stefanick asked. “That’s like a flea not believing in the dog. That’s like a kid coming down on Christmas morning and seeing presents under the tree and saying, ‘Oh look! Presents! They must have exploded themselves here!’ ... Just so, the universe did not put itself here, and the more we learn about the universe, the more it shouts to us about the existence of God.”

And because God’s love created us, he said, no other form of love will satisfy.

“We feel so small in this world,” he told the crowd that came from as far away as Hawaii and Alaska. “We feel so insignificant in this universe.

“I think God looks down from heaven and says, ‘You are huge next to all this.’ As big as a mountain is, can it know someone? As big as an ocean is, can it make a choice? As big as a galaxy is, can it choose to love? No, but you can. ... You’re a huge deal!”

But because of human rejection of God, Stefanick continued, sin and brokenness

entered the world. To applause and shouts of “Amen!” he modified the words of John 3:16 to note that therefore, “‘God so loved you that he gave his only Son.’ Whoa. ...”

This love story — which continues in the sacraments, Stefanick noted — “doesn’t just show you who God is. It shows you who you are.”

### **Baltimore on stage**

St. Margaret Parish in Bel Air represented Baltimore at NCYC during adoration and liturgy of the hours Nov. 17 when Emma Olstein and Jonas Scher sang alongside the Benedictine monks of St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana. Both youths attended a week-long liturgical formation sessions on prayer and music respectively, at St. Meinard Seminary and School of Theology through a program called “One Bread, One Cup.”

“It’s an honor for me to take what I learned and share it” said Olstein as she waited, expectantly, to start the procession toward the stage behind the Blessed Sacrament. Scher recalled his experience at St. Meinard as a life-changing experience that made him more active in his church and showed him that “faith can be fun.”

### **NC! — YC!**

The Indiana Convention Center was the site of nearly 100 breakout sessions, workshops and mega workshops during NCYC. Its many corridors remained packed with eager teens in funny hats (used to trade between each other, an NCYC tradition) who walked leisurely yelling out their cities, parishes or simply chanting “NC!-YC!”

The different Baltimore youth groups headed to different sessions or to the Thematic Village, a unique element of the conference, which hosted hundreds of exhibitors and sponsors.

Youths from St. Bernadette in Severn “walked with the poor” at the Catholic Relief Services Virtual Reality booth. The group from Our Lady of Grace volunteered for one shift at CRS Helping Hands. St. Stephen and St. John the Evangelist in Hydes took time to visit the Salesian Youth Ministry’s activity station.

In his homily at the closing Mass Nov. 18, Los Angeles Archbishop Jose H. Gomez gave specific advice to help the youths do God’s will and to become holy: “The most important thing ... is to pray.”

“When I was your age, I made a decision ... to spend some time in prayer daily, and it has made an extra difference in my life,” Archbishop Gomez said.

“If you make time for prayer every day, you will see a difference. ... Listen to (Jesus), even for just a few minutes. ... Be consistent. Do it every day. I promise you, if you spend time in prayer every day ... you will start to see that Jesus is with you and how much he loves you.”

After three days of faith-related activities, prayer, encounter and entertainment, the Baltimore delegation returned to Baltimore Nov. 18. Maria Stoeck, youth minister for St. Mark Parish in Fallston, said one of the highlights of NCYC 2017 for her was seeing how the six teens from her parish “bonded through their faith with others” and how the powerful stories that speakers share with these teenagers make a difference in their lives forever.

Craig Gould, director of the Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry, called NCYC an opportunity for young people to “bond and explore their faith independently” through myriad activities and entertainment.

Matt Himes, a seminarian at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore was impressed with the “amazing opportunity” for young people to feel united in Christ and saw nothing but “hope and life” in Baltimore youths.

*Catholic News Service contributed to this story.*