

More than 1,700 teens attend high school youth conference in Ohio

STEUBENVILLE, Ohio – Father John Amsberry, pastor of St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Portland, Ore., paused halfway across the stage and looked out at the young audience.

“It’s 2:58 p.m. and ...?” he asked.

“We are loved!” they yelled back.

More than 1,700 teens piled onto Franciscan University’s campus for the first High School Youth Conference in Steubenville to hear the Gospel, sing with Bob Rice and his band about God’s love, and encounter Christ in word and sacrament.

The teens came from 14 states, from as far away as Oregon and South Dakota, and as close as Michigan, Ohio and West Virginia. Participants also included youth ministers, parents, chaperones and priests.

Twenty teens participated in a weeklong Leadership, Evangelization and Discipleship retreat held prior to the June 18-20 conference, which had as its theme “The Word Became Flesh.”

Throughout the weekend, the retreat-goers testified to their fellow teens about the power of confession and Eucharist, of finding God in the church’s ancient rites and sacraments.

“It is all about you and me receiving the blessing of the Father. How many of us are dying for a word of approval from our heavenly Father?” Deacon Ralph Poyo told the teens.

Founder of New Evangelization Ministries in Steubenville, the deacon described getting married and learning to give himself to his wife, and then his daughters, totally, sacrificially, to help them to heaven.

“How awesome it is to share in life together,” he said. “At some point, we have to

realize we're all about relationship. It's what we're designed for. It's what we are made for.

"I'm here to tell you one very important thing. Jesus died for you. Jesus came for you. Jesus loves you. Why would he choose to become man? For you and for me," he said.

"He knows everything that we've done. He was there - he saw it. And you know what? He doesn't leave you. He chose to die for you anyway. He loves you anyway," Deacon Poyo added.

Speaker Tammy Evevard challenged the teens to discover the truth about themselves, to know who it is that God loves.

"You were not made for comfort. You were made for greatness."

She went through some assumptions often made in the broader culture.

"There's a continuous stream of people telling us over and over how the world is. They teach us to say, 'What I see around me is normal. This is the best I'm going to get.' It's a lie.

"If we are made in the image and likeness of God, then we deserve better than the new normal. We can live in God's freedom," she said.

Evevard emphasized that both men and women were created in the image and likeness of God, who described them as "very good."

"Men and women are equal in dignity, and value, and purpose."

Conference workshops covered practical ways of living the Catholic faith. Topics included "Genuine Prayer," "Sharing Christ over Coffee" and "The Holiest Place on Earth: Praying the Mass."

"The greatest thing in life," said Father Amsberry at his workshop, "is our sacred friendship with Christ and sharing that relationship with others. We become a place where people encounter paradise in this world.

“We are the daughters and sons of God. The more we incarnate that, the more attractive we become,” he said.

To live life as sons and daughters of God, said author and musician Chris Padgett, people have to know the God-bearer. “In order for you to be the saint you are called to be, you must be Marian,” he explained.

“God calls us all, and he knows ahead of time that we are weak and broken,” he said in his keynote talk.

“Our problem today is not that we don’t have enough information, or that we don’t want to say yes. The real question is how can we be saints with all the crap in our life?” he asked.

The answer, Padgett said, is God’s mercy. “If we confess our sins, he will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We know Jesus will take us and embrace us and strengthen us. It’s not information, but transformation we need.”

Franciscan University is sponsoring 19 youth conferences in 14 locations across the United States and Canada this summer.