

# Reflections on youth programs

In the forward to “What We Have Seen and Heard: Essays and Stories from Black Catholics in Baltimore,” Cardinal William Keeler opened with a quote from the Acts of the Apostles 4:20, which read, “Peter and John said, ‘It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard.’ ”

I have seen and heard from our young people in Baltimore, and they are good. From September to June I’ve attended every youth program imaginable – the last Harambee effort ending weeks ago with a powerful two-day youth gathering at Washington’s Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish and Baltimore’s St. Mary’s Spiritual Center. On two of the hottest days of this year, 300-plus young people from Baltimore and Washington “Jammed for Jesus” in song, with prayer and praise, and fellowship one to another irrespective of church, culture or city.

What happened on June 7 and 8 at prior lock-ins and retreats, youth gatherings and days of reflection throughout Baltimore did feel and look good. I left every church/school event inspired and encouraged about the young church of today. But as suggested in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask,” I know that I have not seen it all nor can I comprehend the trials, tribulations, the struggles one too many of our young people and those who minister to them face. The poet Dunbar writes of the suppressed pain of our people:

“We wear the mask that grins and lies,

“It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, This debt we pay to human guile;

“With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

“And mouth with myriad subtleties.

“Why should the world be over-wise, In counting all our tears and sighs?

“Nay, let them only see us, while We wear the mask.

“We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries to thee from tortured souls arise.

"We sing, but oh the clay is vile

"Beneath our feet, and long the mile;

"But let the world dream otherwise, We wear the mask!"

It's getting "thick" as our young people suggest, and that means it's "thickest" amongst the youngest and neediest in our parishes and communities. At this point in the game - like no other time before - youth ministry cannot be seen as a luxury or volunteer sport!

"What I have seen and heard" suggests quite the contrary. Ministering to and with our young people given the spiritual, cultural and social complexities involved - to name a few - requires more of a dedicated professional touch than ever before. Many of our parishes are struggling faithfully to build/maintain youth ministry programs with dated tools and overwhelmed volunteers. Persistence has paid off; hanging in there while struggling for change has blessed many young people over the years. These youth programs would benefit the most and the super human minister/volunteer would be best served when burn-out can be checked and consistency/stability in ministry is employed (literally)!

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