

Teens explore theology in Pinkard Scholars Program

Tristan Deppe acknowledges that then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's "Introduction to Christianity" was not exactly at the top of his reading list.

But the text by the future Pope Benedict XVI was just one of several weighty theological works the 16-year-old parishioner of Immaculate Heart of Mary, Baynesville, read for the first time last semester as one of 23 students enrolled in the Pinkard Scholars Program of Youth Theological Studies at St. Mary's Seminary and University, Roland Park.

The future pope's book, written more than 30 years ago for college students, delves into the philosophical and spiritual meanings of Christianity by exploring the Apostles Creed line by line.

"The creed is something you say every week in church and you never really think about it," said Tristan, a junior at Loyola Blakefield, Towson.

"It was interesting to see it from a different perspective and really analyze it."

Father Gladstone Stevens, S.S., a St. Mary's professor who works with the Pinkard Scholars, said the program is designed to help young people deepen their understanding of faith in a pluralistic society.

"St. Mary's has created a program that introduces young men and women to the great tradition of Christian reflection and creates the space where they can dialogue about these ideas," he explained.

The Sulpician priest said the program addresses many of the classic questions of theology, such as the existence of evil. Other texts that are studied include books of the Bible and works by important thinkers like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther. Students are invited to think of faith as being rooted in reason.

Young people have a deep interest in theological concepts and they are open to

interfaith discussions, Father Stevens said.

Tristan wanted to be a part of the Pinkard Scholars program because he has grown in his faith in the last year, he said. When a priest in his parish recently delivered a homily about Christ's divinity, Tristan said he was able to follow it because that was one of the topics covered at St. Mary's.

"We also talked a lot about the historical background on Jesus' life and the impact he had on the people of the time," he said.

Laura Abbasi, a 16-year-old junior at Our Lady of Mount Carmel High School, Middle River, said participating in the Pinkard Scholars program helped her think about theology in new ways. She particularly enjoyed discussions with her peers which helped broaden her worldview, she said.

"Studying theology is studying the human condition," said Laura, a parishioner of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

A college-level introductory course, students receive three college credits when they complete the Pinkard Scholars program. In addition to academic work, students participate in a retreat and complete a community service component which can be used for credit toward high school community service requirements.

The program was started more than eight years ago with an initial grant from the Lily Endowment. Since then, it has been permanently endowed through a gift of Ann Pinkard.

Although open to students of all faiths and schools, most of the students enrolled come from Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.