

Vocations summit held in Libertytown

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It's no accident that St. Peter the Apostle in Libertytown has five men in formation to become archdiocesan priests and one woman preparing to take her vows as a Daughter of St. Paul.

Promoting religious vocations is a top priority for the Frederick County parish and one that Monsignor John Dietzenbach, along with his staff, takes seriously.

In a first-ever archdiocesan vocations summit called by Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien May 12, the pastor told more than 120 priests, youth ministers, religious education instructors and others what's working to foster vocations at his parish. He was one of four speakers who explored ways parishes and schools can promote the religious life.

Eucharistic adoration is one of the most cited factors by seminarians as an example of how St. Peter encouraged them, he said.

"They know someone is always praying for them," said Monsignor Dietzenbach, noting that St. Peter offers perpetual adoration.

His parish also maintains an active youth ministry where young people feel at home in the church, he said. Seminarians are encouraged by the example of priests who are happy serving at the parish, he said, and they like the way the local church connects to the wider faith community through programs like Mount 2000 in Emmitsburg, service opportunities in Appalachia and mission trips to India, Africa and Haiti.

"We're a very family-friendly church," he said. "It's not just for adults."

Monsignor Dietzenbach believes the presence of seminarian interns in the parish is

another way the faith community promotes vocations.

“Once one person says yes to a religious vocation, it builds and there’s a sense of excitement,” he said. “I came from a little Iowa parish and we had 25 vocations to the priesthood. They felt a lot of support of the people.”

Prayer is key to promoting religious vocations, according to Father David Toups, associate director of the Secretariat for Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington.

In his keynote address, Father Toups said it is crucial for individuals, families and the wider faith community to ask God for more priests, deacons and religious.

Father Toups encouraged youth ministers, religious education teachers, priests and others to teach young people to pray through the Mass, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Lectio Divina (meditation and reflection on the Sacred Scriptures) and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It’s also important to teach young people to have periods of silence so they can listen to God speaking to them, he said.

“In order to encourage prayer among our young people, we must be people of prayer,” he said. “You cannot give what you do not have.”

In addition to prayer, Father Toups said a sense of invitation is critical for encouraging vocations. He encouraged all Catholics to remember four letters to invite young men and women to consider the religious life – “ICNU,” short for “I see in you.”

“It’s something you can say to young people,” he said. “I see in you the qualities that would make a good priest or religious.”

Father Toups asked parish leaders to look for young men and women who are generous, compassionate, kind and faithful.

“Elicit within them their greatness,” the priest said, adding that they should only plant seeds without applying pressure.

Marlene Lauer, a youth minister at Holy Trinity in Glen Burnie and chair of her

parish's vocations committee, said her parish tries to be accessible to youth. It often combines prayer with fun activities.

"At every event, food is involved," she said with a laugh.

For the last eight years, confirmation candidates have attended the Chrism Mass at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland and enjoyed a tailgate party after Mass. This year, 100 people from Holy Trinity attended.

Other activities have included a recent "adore-a-thon" where young people prayed all night long.

While Maureen Parker, mother of Father Adam Parker, prayed every day for religious vocations, she and her husband, George, did not explicitly encourage their son to become a priest.

"But neither did we discourage or disparage it," she said. When their son told them he wanted to be a priest, they supported him but worked hard not to apply pressure, she said.

Being the parent of a priest is a joyful experience, Parker said.

"A sense of awe continues each time he celebrates Mass," she said.

The vocations summit was a joint effort of the archdiocesan vocations office and the office of youth and young adult ministry.

Archbishop O'Brien, who celebrated a Mass for the participants, said he was encouraged by the strong turnout and hopes to make the summit an annual event.

"Something like this is going to have a ripple effect," he said.