

Youth 'Focus' on Vocations

The Catholic Review

A study conducted in the 1980s indicated that most priests and religious first seriously thought about ministry around the age of 11 and then again in their junior year of high school. Two years after that study, "Focus 11" was born. First instituted in the Archdiocese of Detroit, the program had two components: one aimed at 11-year-olds and one at 11th graders. It consisted of lesson plans, exercises, and prayer services designed to help our children explore this radical expression of their faith.

Other dioceses have followed Detroit's lead over the years and now our own has brought the program to the Catholic children of our area. A collaborative effort between the offices of the Archdiocese and the Region 4 members of the National Religious Vocation Conference, Focus 11 took place Oct. 27 at Notre Dame of Maryland University. More than 600 fifth-grade students from nearly 30 area Catholic schools came together for a day of prayers, music, vocation-related activities and exhibits and the celebration of the Mass. Typical of the collaborative spirit in our schools, students from several of our high schools - Calvert Hall, Mount St. Joseph and Mercy - were also on hand to help out as greeters and musicians.

Perhaps most importantly that day, the students had time to interact with priests and women and men religious, witnessing their joyful ministry and asking questions about their own vocation journey. Among those present to lead these young people were Daughter of St. Paul Sister Margaret Michael Gillis and Father Matt Buening, both of whom entertained the students with their musical talents and youthful exuberance.

I was pleased to be present for this important day and to see how enthusiastic the students were in their participation. Bishop Mitch Rozanski celebrated the Mass with many of our Archdiocesan and religious priests who gave up much of their day to encourage our youth in contemplating a life of generous service to Christ and to others.

Organizers of the program - Father Austin Murphy, director of our Vocations Office; Sister of Bon Secours Patricia Dowling, NRVC Co-Chair; Lauri Przybysz, coordinator of Marriage and Family Life in our Department of Evangelization; and Dr. Camille Brown, associate superintendent of Catholic Schools - developed a theme for the day, "Called to be Saints," and students created prayer cards with a picture of their saint and corresponding prayer in preparation for it.

Presenters, including Father Anthony Bozeman, a Josephite priest from the Archdiocese of New Orleans, told the students that saints come in all forms and reminded them of their own worthiness to serve God as a priest or religious - should they be called to do so.

The event was limited to Baltimore-area schools and there is a plan to expand it to other areas of the Archdiocese in 2012 and 2013, with follow-up to occur as appropriate and when our 11-year-olds reach their pivotal junior year.

Please God, it will bring our children closer to Him and to our Church, and perhaps help them respond favorably to the stirrings of their faith. I also pray it will encourage their families, teachers, and parish priests, deacons and religious to challenge them to prayerfully consider this generous and joyful "career" of service.