

Youths grab faith by the 'Reigns'

This inaugural Mass in April of 2005, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed, "The Church is alive ... the Church is young."

This was beautifully evidenced the week before Thanksgiving as 21,000 Catholic teens descended on Kansas City, Mo., for the 2009 national Catholic Youth Conference. The conference theme was "Christ Reigns."

Organizers report that three weeks before the Conference began registrations for the event had already exceeded the capacity of the main exhibition hall, where all the general sessions were to take place. The Conference ended up taking place in two sites to accommodate the throng of young believers, more than 200 from our own Archdiocese among them.

I am grateful to each of the participants from our local Church who attended the Conference, including Molly Sinnott, a parishioner of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Crofton and a member of our Archdiocesan Youth Advisory Council, who shared this first-hand account of her experience at the Conference:

Your Excellency,

I am writing this letter as a grateful pilgrim, for I was blessed this weekend to attend the National Catholic Youth Conference with 240 other excited teens from the Baltimore Archdiocese.

After God blessed us with a day of safe travel, we arrived in Kansas City. Thursday night was our first of five general sessions. As a friend of mine so eloquently put it upon returning home, general session was "a cross between Woodstock, the Super Bowl and Sunday Mass - but a real Catholic experience." Twenty thousand of the attendees were herded into the Sprint Center, as noisy as the Super Bowl crowd, crowned with goofy hats from all over the nation and brightly colored T-shirts proclaiming the conference's theme: "Christ Reigns."

During the five general sessions, my eyes were opened to a side of the Church that I had never really seen: 20,000 teens who loved Jesus Christ, singing at the top of

their lungs to thank Him for His mercy.

We also heard from several speakers over the course of the conference. We heard witnesses to the importance of service, the existence of miracles, the role of community, the power of prayer and the sacred role of the Eucharist in our church.

On Friday, we walked in a 24,000-person eucharistic procession down the streets of Kansas City. That night, we heard incredible testimony from a young couple on the virtue of chastity.

However, the spiritual aspects of the conference weren't built upon just the morning and evening general sessions. In between, there were more than 50 options for workshops and sessions, including: social justice seminars; bishops' roundtables; technology in ministry workshops; liturgy through comedy shows; faith's role in sports; women of the Church; saint studies; vocation discernment; modest fashion and many more.

My favorite of the sessions was a bishops' roundtable, where I sat down with Bishop Peter Christensen of Superior, Wis., who offered a refreshing reminder that the Church is a body of living, breathing, loving people.

Another favorite was the "Reign Forest," a gigantic facility above the convention center with hundreds of booths, a large coffee-shop concert space, an athletic facility, an obstacle course and gift shops. Though we took some of our meals here, the rest were found in the restaurants of Kansas City, where 24,000 of us were proclaimed the most polite visitors they had ever received.

I am struggling, just like they told me I would, to portray the enormity of this event or the powerful impact it had on my faith. To say that the sight of 21,000 teens doing the "Catholic Dance" made my eyes tear may seem strange. But, for me, it was very powerful.

This weekend was a much-needed reminder that our Church, the young and the old, is alive and well. I saw reflected in that crowd a big, loving, awesome God, and I know in my heart that any angels He had watching over us would have been doing the "Catholic Dance" right along with us.

During the National Catholic Youth Conference, we worshipped in a lot of wacky ways. But, in those moments of reverence, when the Eucharist was before us and our heads were bowed, we were reminded that Christ truly does reign in us, with us, and through us.

Our master of ceremonies returned often to one verse of a song he had on his mind. "We are Many, yet we are One. We are separate, yet bound in His love. And together, we are all His hands and His feet, bringing mercy and peace to this world. We are Many and One."

The weekend was a powerful reinforcement of the fact that 'Catholic' is synonymous with 'universal.' As a community of Christian Catholics, we are never alone in trying to do His will. We are Many, but we are made One in Him.

Thank you for your support and prayers for our pilgrimage. We hope to bring what we learned and saw in Kansas City back here to the Premier See. I speak with certainty when I say that the young Church of Baltimore returns energized for the name and work of Christ – we come not off the mountain, but are instead sent forth from it, to do His work here and everywhere. God bless.

Molly Sinnott

Well said, Molly.

We owe it to our young people to allow them to experience the universality of our Church through events such as this and World Youth Day, as well as the Annual Pilgrimage for Youth and Young Adults in Baltimore each Saturday before Palm Sunday and the Baltimore Youth Catholic Conference in Ocean City every other November.

At these gatherings, young Catholics come to understand that they are united with those they encounter by virtue of their Catholicism, which, they learn, extends beyond their own community, their own parish and school.

It is my hope that participation in these events by our young people will continue to grow and I am most grateful to those in our Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministry, as well as to the many youth ministers, volunteers, chaperones and

sponsors who make these faith-changing experiences possible for our youth.

Together, we can make our goal of sending many youths to World Youth Day 2011 in Madrid, Spain, a reality! And repeat this miracle of grace.