

## Ablaze • Enciende el Fuego



Top photo: A crucifix leads a procession into Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis during the opening general session of the National Catholic Youth Conference on Nov. 18. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

Bottom photo: Youths hold hands for the Our Father during the National Catholic Youth Conference closing Mass in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 20. (Photo by Natalie Hoefer)

# Youths encounter Christ through talks, sacraments, fellowship and music at NCYC

By Natalie Hoefer

There is no simple answer to the question, “What is the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC)?”

It is so many things.

Logistically, it is a three-day gathering of Catholic high school youths from around the country that happens every two years.

There are talks, Mass, eucharistic adoration, music, service projects, and a convention hall filled with exhibitors from religious institutions and organizations, vendors of religious items and areas for teens to play and pray.

That is the structure of NCYC. But the spirit of the youths and the Holy Spirit comprise the flesh and breath of this event. Every component of it is designed to nurture today’s Catholic youths in their faith and their relationship with Christ.

“NCYC is an opportunity for young people to experience the breadth of our Catholic Church and an opportunity to have an encounter with Jesus Christ amongst their friends, and all their new friends,” said Christina Lamas, executive director of the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry which organizes the event. “It provides hope, inspiration, and gives life to our present and our future Church.”

## Speakers ‘on fire for Christ’

Much of the teens’ time at NCYC is spent listening to faith-nourishing and thought-provoking talks by renowned Catholic speakers.

“We look for individuals who can speak from their own personal relationship with Christ, who reflect Church teaching, who can be an example, model and witness of what it means to live a life in Christ that young people can look up to, hear their witness and see elements of that witness in their own life,” said Lamas. “We want speakers on fire for Christ who are filled

with the Holy Spirit.”

“I really enjoy the talks,” said Ellie Fulbright, 17, of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, Mont. “I’m really into seeing different people’s points of views and being able to dive in deeper and realizing maybe, ‘Oh, that’s an interesting point,’ or maybe, ‘Oh, now I understand why we do that.’ ”

This year, she and the nearly 11,000 participants had five break-out sessions, three general sessions and three types of youth-led discussions to choose from.

## ‘It’s super meaningful’

NCYC abounds with opportunities for young people to partake in the sacraments.

The event begins with a eucharistic procession through the halls and outside of the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis, with participants kneeling along the path then joining in the procession after the Blessed Sacrament passes by.

Masses are celebrated at various times during each day, including a conference-wide Mass in Lucas Oil Stadium that closes the event and sends the youths back home to put into practice what they learned. (See related article on page 3B.)

The sacrament of reconciliation is offered throughout the event. (See related article on page 12B.) Kaylee Klos, 17, of the Archdiocese of Dubuque, Iowa, listed confession among her favorite aspects of NCYC.

“Getting out of my hometown and speaking with a priest I’ve never seen, it was something I’d never experienced before,” she said.

Many youths interviewed by *The Criterion* during the event cited the group adoration on the second night of NCYC as their favorite part of the three-day event.

Elaina Deardorff, 17, of the Archdiocese of Dubuque, was one such teen.

“My favorite thing is adoration as a huge group,” she said. “Seeing how everyone comes together to worship the Lord—it’s super meaningful.” (See related article on page 7B.)

## Pointing ‘back to the Catholic faith’

The Village is the primary source of interaction among the teens.



Teens participate in karaoke in the National Catholic Youth Conference Village in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 19.



National Catholic Youth Conference participants listen to a talk by Steve Angrisano in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 19.



Youths pray during eucharistic adoration on Nov. 19 in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis during the National Catholic Youth Conference. (Photos by Natalie Hoefer)

The theme of this year’s Village was “Holy Spirit Mall,” with different areas named after common-known stores.

For instance, Service Merchandise was the area where youths could participate in service projects. (See related article on page 11B.) At the Camelot Café, kids could enjoy karaoke. One of the hot spots in the Village was the Arcade, where participants could take part in games like dodge ball, Human Hungry Hippo and large-sized chess.

The Village also included exhibitors from numerous Catholic universities, religious orders and organizations, plus vendors selling anything from books to rosaries to Catholic-themed T-shirts and socks.

“The Village provides an opportunity for young people to see their faith in action,” Lamas explained. “The opportunities for service, the universities, different organizations and their missions—they all point them back to the Catholic faith.

“It’s also an opportunity to have fun, to learn, to have fellowship, to be with one another. I think the Village does all that and more. And it’s a hot spot for all the trading that takes place, especially those desired hats!”

Abigail Woodley, 15, of the Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau, Alaska, mentioned the Village as one of her favorite aspects of NCYC “because it’s so amazing to see all the places around the world that I can connect with.”

## ‘Great to hear music I can vibe to’

Woven into almost every aspect of NCYC is something most teens connect

with—music. Breakout sessions, general sessions, adoration, Mass—all begin with, include and end with music appropriate to the desired tone whether upbeat, worship, reflective or prayerful.

“Music speaks to all of us, but it’s very close to home with young people,” said Lamas. “They identify with the art, the lyrics. It’s a critical part of the program.”

Texas resident Adeline Fellona, 14, of the Archdiocese of the Military Services, appreciates the music of NCYC.

“The music at my home parish is kind of old-timey,” she admitted. “It’s really great to hear music that I can vibe to and that also praises Jesus. It’s a lot of fun to hear that here.”

## ‘Potential to transform society’

Lamas said her “hope and dream” for NCYC participants “is that they experience God’s love and have an encounter with Christ. How that transpires in each one’s life, that’s for God to determine.”

She said the event is scheduled to occur again in Indianapolis in 2023 and 2025.

“If you haven’t experienced a NCYC, you definitely want to make sure that you experience it once in your lifetime,” Lamas advised. “You can’t step into an environment of 10,000 or 20,000 kids who want to be here and not be affected. You won’t leave the same.

“There’s something about the joy that young people bring that transforms us individually and as a community and has potential to transform society and our world.” †

## Archbishop Thompson urges youths to 'keep the fire alive' at NCYC closing Mass

By Sean Gallagher

At the closing Mass of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC), Archbishop Charles C. Thompson encouraged the nearly 11,000 teens from across the country to return home with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

"Let us go forth with that fire to more fully embrace the Lord's mission in bringing about the kingdom of God, striving always to be Christ-centered in all that we are about," said Archbishop Thompson. "Let us go and be disciples. Let us go and make a difference. ... Let us take courage. His dominion is indeed everlasting. The glory of God shall not be denied."

The closing Mass was celebrated on Nov. 20, the final day of the three-day conference, in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

Throughout NCYC, the youths were led through a meditation on the Apostles and the Blessed Virgin Mary receiving the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, symbolized by tongues of fire that came to rest above their head. Thus, the theme for the conference was, in English, "Ablaze," and in Spanish, "Enciende el fuego."

During his homily, Archbishop Thompson called out at various times the theme in one language with his listeners responding with the theme in the other language.

The Mass took place on the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.

Archbishop Thompson noted that Christ's kingship stands in contrast to the image of the kings of this world.

"His throne was a cross," Archbishop Thompson said. "His crown was made of thorns. He was adorned with nails rather than jewels. And rather than an ornate shrine for burial, he was laid in a borrowed tomb."

This humble vision of Christ's reign, however, Archbishop Thompson said, is essential to the life of the Church.

"After all, without the cross, there is no Eucharist," he said. "Without the Eucharist, there is no Church. And without the Church, there is no NCYC. It all hinges on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, his total gift of self for our salvation."

Archbishop Thompson encouraged his listeners to nurture a relationship with Christ so that they could learn to recognize the voice of him who is their shepherd and friend.

"Just as we do with family and our closest friends, we must spend quality time with him—not just at NCYC, but every day," Archbishop Thompson said.

Having an active life of faith in which Christ can reign as



Deacons Matthew Perronie, left, and Michael Clawson, third from left, assist Archbishop Charles C. Thompson during the closing Mass at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 20. (Photo by Natalie Hoefler)



Deacon John Jacobi, who ministers at St. Michael Parish in Bradford, distributes Communion to an NCYC participant during the closing Mass on Nov. 20 in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)



Participants in the National Catholic Youth Conference raise their hands in prayer before the closing Mass of the conference on Nov. 20 in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)



Father Ajani Gibson of the Archdiocese of New Orleans preaches before the closing Mass of the conference on Nov. 20 in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)

king in our heart throughout the rest of the year beyond NCYC is the challenge, Archbishop Thompson noted.

"It's easy when we're all here together sharing the same faith," he said. "It's another thing when we have to do that sometimes out on that limb alone, out in our schools, neighborhoods and workplaces. In other words, we cannot let the world get the best of us, but to dare to give our best for the mission of Jesus Christ in transforming the world. You possess that grace within you."

Annalise Loucks knows that challenge well. Attending NCYC for the second time, she is a student at a public high school in Salina, Kan., where she said living Gospel principles is far from the norm.

On the last day of the conference, not long before she'd return home, Annalise spoke of her renewed desire to "spread the word" in her school.

"There are a lot of people at my school who are scared to show their faith," she said. "I want to open up and spread God's word more and be unashamed."

Speaking to Annalise and the nearly 11,000 other youths at the closing Mass, Archbishop Thompson urged them to allow the fire of the Holy Spirit "to permeate your particular gifts, talents and energy in service to others, not merely in our own name,

but in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, king of the universe."

He also reminded them of the importance of their putting into action their God-given talents to the life of the Church.

"Embrace your place in the Church," Archbishop Thompson said. "To carry out the mission of Christ, the Church needs each and every one of us. To be clear, you are not the future Church, but the young Church here and now."

Youths at the Mass spoke afterward of the joy they felt about gathering with their fellow Catholic teens from across the country, especially after all of the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, which began just a few months after the last NCYC in late 2019.

"It was one of the most touching ceremonies I've ever seen," said Aaron Baker of Barnesville, Minn., of the closing Mass. "It's so nice to just be back here with all my friends and peers, and all the friends I made before at the last NCYC."

"I grew quite a lot in my spiritual journey," said Sloane Janopoulos of Naples, Fla. "I didn't know that that many people feel the same way that I do."

In his final words to his young listeners, Archbishop Thompson encouraged them to "keep the fire alive. By God's grace, keep the fire alive." †

## Despite COVID measures, the 'spirit of NCYC will remain the same'

By Natalie Hoefer

Each National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) is unique, but perhaps none more so than this year's, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Christina Lamas

There was much to consider. From determining safety measures to deciding whether the event would happen at all, the staff of the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) which organizes the event was even busier

than normal the last two years.

*The Criterion* spoke with NFCYM executive director Christina Lamas to discuss the effects of the pandemic on planning and conducting this year's NCYC, and any changes that might be seen in the future.

### 'Day by day, minute by minute'

"Safety is a number one priority for the organization," said Lamas. "Not just having a safe environment, but that we provide an opportunity for young people to walk in and know they are taken care of, and for their parents to know that we're taking care of them."

That's why several factors went into determining whether or not to have the event and, once the decision to go forward was made, identifying what safety measures would need to be put in place.

"We were constantly having conversations with health care professionals and conference industry experts," Lamas said.

The organization announced in January that the event would take place, but the decision was not final.

"We were advised not to make any final decisions until we got closer to the event simply because, as we were living through a pandemic and still are, things were always changing day by day, minute by minute," she explained.

"When we opened registration in May, the trend nationally seemed to be going fairly good. We saw a lot of restrictions being removed, parts of the country opening up, travel beginning to happen, so it was a very good prognosis."

More safety decisions needed to be made as the event drew near, decisions about face masks and how to assure participants were COVID-free before coming to the event.

"There were multiple factors that went into the decision," said Lamas. "We had to make sure the environment was safe, yes, but also security, the number of participants, what activities we would and wouldn't offer.

"So all of the program aspects, plus the building and personnel, all of that went into the criteria of making the final decision of whether or not NCYC would take place and how it would look if it did."

Of course, prayer was part of the process in discerning the right and best path forward.

"God has ways of working," Lamas said with a smile. "Problems would come up, and conversations with health professionals and others in the conference industry. We kept moving forward in faith. The unknown became known, so we kept walking in faith that God would provide. And here we are!"

### Keeping everyone safe

One major decision affecting the look of NCYC this year was the determination to limit the number of participants to half of the normal 20,000. Including young people and all those contributing behind the scenes, the number participating this year was nearly 11,000.

All were required to submit either proof of receiving the COVID vaccine or results showing a negative COVID test result within 72 hours of the event.

Face masks were also required to completely cover both nose and mouth. Volunteers offered gentle reminders when spotting a mask dangling from an ear or tucked under a chin.

This year, NFCYM also offered a virtual NCYC. While the numbers fluctuated through the course of the livestreamed event, Lamas said the average number of virtual participants was about 2,000.

### 'The spirit of NCYC will remain'

While NCYC might have looked different in terms of numbers and safety measures this year, Lamas noted that every NCYC is unique.

"It's the first NCYC for everyone attending this year," she said. "Whether it's their first or second or 10th, we're all experiencing for the first time this NCYC."

"Things may be different, but God's spirit is the same. The energy, the joy, the smiles, those encounters, those haven't changed."

As for the future, Lamas noted COVID-19 might have an effect on the event, but in a positive sense, such as "thinking outside the box," she said.

"We all had to think and stretch



Participants in the National Catholic Youth Conference this year were required to wear masks during the event. (Photo by Natalie Hoefer)

ourselves like we've not done before. I think you'll see a lot of innovation and creativity here moving forward—I think the pandemic sparked that in all of us.

"But the spirit of NCYC will remain." †

## Creative effort gives youths the opportunity to express how they view their lives

By John Shaughnessy

Zoey Dennler was intrigued as she came upon one of the most popular areas of the interactive Village of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis.

The teenager from the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa, saw a crowd of youths flowing through the area where a series

of small walls were marked with a few red "I am" stickers, stickers that were surrounded by numerous white notes that completed that thought:

**I am ... lonely.**  
**I am ... beautiful.**  
**I am ... more than my anxieties.**  
**I am ... loved, but I need to remember how much.**



One of the most popular areas in the Interactive Village of the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 18-20 offered youths the opportunity to anonymously describe the way they feel about their lives. Their notes were then posted on walls for public viewing. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

Zoey soon learned that all the descriptions on the hundreds of white notes were written by the youths attending the conference, anonymously sharing their insights on their feelings, their joys, their challenges, their lives.

Asking how she could write one of the white notes herself, she was told that all she needed to do was to enter one of the four blue-curtained booths for privacy, write whatever she wanted to share, and then place her white note in a box on the inside of the booth. Later, one of the organizers of the area would empty the box of new messages and put them on the walls.

**I am ... not perfect (and that's OK).**  
**I am ... the quiet weirdo who expresses themselves and cares for others.**

**I am ... trying to fit in.**  
**I am ... an empathetic woman who wants to be loved the way I deserve.**

Coming out of the booth after she wrote how she felt about herself, Zoey said she was grateful for the opportunity.

"I saw the stickers with the 'I am' and saw the different things people wrote," said Zoey, a member of St. James Parish in Washington, Iowa. "It's really cool that they're letting people have a voice—without getting in front of a lot of people—and doing it anonymously."

The "I am" effort was offered by Ablaze Ministries, a ministry focused

on connecting youths, parents and youth ministers, to deepen their relationship with each other and with God.

"It's not too often that teens get asked how they're doing. And sometimes, it's in large groups where that can be intimidating at times," said P. J. Lozano, an Ablaze staff member who was helping to oversee the area. "We wanted to give them a safe place to say who they are."

**I am ... not who I want to be.**  
**I am ... strong, beautiful and deserving of your attention.**  
**I am ... struggling but finding my way with the strength given me by God.**

Lozano said that there have been many times when the youths were waiting in line for a booth to become available, so they could write their thoughts about their life.

"Some of the kids are spending a lot of time in there," he said. "It's amazing what happens when we really give teens the opportunity to express themselves."

After every day of the conference, Ablaze staff members prayed over the notes, praying for the youths who wrote them.

**I am ... a child of God, never perfect, and always striving for a better relationship with God.**

**I am ... not someone you can just forget about and come back to. I am here to stay. I am loved. I'm me. †**

## From its soaring start, NCYC calls youths to rely upon the Holy Spirit to transform the world

By John Shaughnessy

In the middle of one of his powerful, pulsating songs that rocked Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on the night of Nov. 18, Lecrae suddenly stopped singing to talk to the nearly 11,000 youths from across the United States who had come together for the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC).

“I just wanted to say something to all you,” the Grammy Award-winning singer said as the raucous crowd went silent. “God wants to use you in this stage of your life now. There is a zeal inside you. Use that passion to change the world for the Lord. Go crazy for the Lord now, and go crazy for him for the rest of your life.”

Lacrae then shared a story about a woman he came upon on a bridge in New York City, a woman who was getting ready to jump from it until he held onto her.

“I said, ‘What are you doing?!’ She started kicking and screaming, saying, ‘Let me go! I’m trying to go meet God!’ I said, ‘Sweetheart, you can meet God on this side of the bridge.’”

That line from Lacrae resulted in a roar of approval from the youths in the stadium, and more cheers followed when the singer added, “The thing I wanted her to know is the same thing I want you to know. Let me tell you all, if God woke you up this morning, he’s not done with you yet. So if you got things that God needs you to do, you need to keep going. If you’re going through some tough times, just fight a little longer, my friends.”

“You may be battling the storm. You may be feeling you don’t have what it takes. But I promise you, God is speaking in this moment. The Holy Spirit is speaking to you, and he’s saying something like”—which led Lacrae to start singing a song that begins, “Fight a little longer, my friend. It’s all worth it in the end.”

In that span of a few minutes, Lacrae had set the tone for the evening and the three-day conference.

As he ended his part of the opening program with one last song, a number of youths rushed toward the stage, jumping and dancing while many in the stands swayed back and forth as the flashlights from their cell phones lit up the darkened stadium.

The scene marked the transition for the mood that enveloped the stadium for the rest of the night. That moment of storming toward the stage gave way to a theme of



Grammy Award-winning singer Lecrae delivered a soulful and spiritual performance during the opening session of the National Catholic Youth Conference in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 18. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

calming the storms that rock the lives of teenagers—that rock the lives of people of all ages.

As a huge, towering image of a dove was projected above the stage, the rest of the night focused on the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome fear, doubt and heartbreak and lead people to their true identity as children of God who have a distinct purpose in life to change the world and the people they encounter.

Readings from the Bible echoed that theme. So did a series of soothing, calming songs whose lyrics called upon the Holy Spirit to descend upon the crowd, to let his spirit fill the youths.

“*Holy Spirit, come rest on us. You’re all we want. You’re all we want.*”

The evening’s keynote speaker—Chika Anyanwu—continued that theme in her presentation.

She shared her own story of saying “yes” to the promptings of the Holy Spirit—even though it took her away from everyone and everything she loved.



An image of the Holy Spirit—a powerful theme and presence during the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis—rose above Lucas Oil Stadium on Nov. 18 where nearly 11,000 youths from across the country came together for the opening session of the conference. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

The Catholic evangelist initially turned down an offer to move from her California home to work for Vagabond Missions in Pittsburgh, an initiative that strives to support inner-city high school youths and bring them closer to God. She said no because it would mean moving away from her family, her friends and the warm weather she loved. She was also afraid of making the move.

“I had a lot of fear,” she told the youths, adding that she talked to God in this way. “What if I fail? What if I mess up? What if I just want to move back home? God, I’m scared.”

Yet she made the move after she visited Pittsburgh and saw the need of the youths and saw how she could help them.

“A lot of us are living in fear,” she told the crowd. “Whether it’s the fear of the unknown, a fear of someone, a fear of a virus that’s unknown. But God is with us. He always will be.”

“The Lord has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Everything that we need to do his will, to do his work, to do it well, he’s given it to us. We are moving forward. We are focusing on our faith over fear. We are focusing on Jesus who says he is the way.”

Anyanwu told the youths that it all comes down to one question, a question that seemed to inspire nearly every aspect of this year’s National Catholic Youth Conference:

“Are you ready to be transformed by the Holy Spirit?”

She provided her own answer to that question.

“The Holy Spirit has a plan, a purpose for you,” she said. “Wherever you are in your relationship with the Lord, it doesn’t matter. Today, you can choose to be an open vessel to the Holy Spirit, who will take you places that you never thought you would ever go. This Holy Spirit has a plan for you, if you say yes.”

“The Lord has not given you a spirit of fear, a spirit of timidity. The Holy Spirit has given you a spirit of courage.” †



Youths from across the country use their cell phones to light up a darkened Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis during a performance by Grammy Award-winning singer Lecrae during the opening session of the National Catholic Youth Conference on Nov. 18. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

## Youths share defining moments in their lives when they turned to God

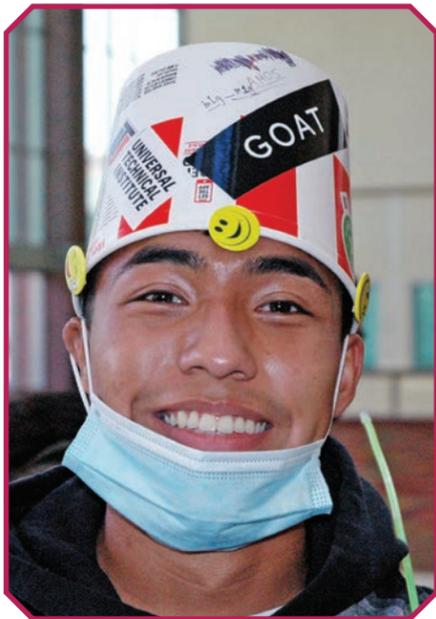
By John Shaughnessy

Sixteen-year-old Roch Egan remembers the moment as a turning point in his faith—the day when his mother was near death.

“Five years ago, my mom had a miscarriage, and she almost died at home and in the hospital,” recalled Roch, a member of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Parish in Indianapolis. “I remember that night praying like crazy. Ever since then, I’ve gotten so much closer to God. I trust him more.

“Now, I like to think of God as a friend, even though I know he’s much more than that. I can go to him whenever I need him. My faith is what my life is for now.”

Roch shared that turning point in his faith during the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis on Nov. 18. He is one of the nearly 11,000 youths from across the country who attended the three-day event, and many of



Turning to God, Miguel Saucedo found comfort and hope during a tough time in his life. Miguel is a member of Church of the Annunciation Parish in Shelbyville, Ky., in the Archdiocese of Louisville. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

them came with their own story of turning closer to God and wanting to deepen their relationship with him even more.

In a year when masks were required to attend the conference, the youths may have had to hide their smiles, but they still freely expressed the joy of their faith and their bond with God.

At 18, Ava Yurczyk shared that her Catholic faith is the focal point of her life.

“It’s what I base my values, my decisions around,” said Ava, a member of St. Luke Parish in Shoreline, Wash., in the Archdiocese of Seattle.

A high school senior, Ava turned to her faith in God when she was trying to make a decision that countless peers will be making this year—choosing the right college.

“I’ve always felt called to be a caregiver, which has led to my desire to be a nurse in a neo-intensive care unit,” she said. “I wanted to find a place where I could combine deepening my faith along with my education—and being around people who can support me and so we can grow together.”

That desire led her to choose the University of Mary in Bismarck, S.D., as her college destination.

“The second I stepped on campus, I turned to my dad and said, ‘I could live here for four years.’” Ava recalled. “I knew it was the place for me.”

She also feels confident in her choice knowing the Catholic university is named after the Blessed Mother.



Youths from Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Parish in Indianapolis pose for a photo in the Interactive Village of the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 18. Roch Egan, left, Kierra Wilson, Moire Roller, Mataya Watson and Elianna Watson are all wearing the NCYC sweatshirt for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

“I know I’m going to be a mom someday, and I’ve turned to Mary for that calling. I’ve found comfort in my relationship with her.”

Miguel Saucedo was seeking a measure of comfort and hope in his life about a year ago.

“I was struggling. I was lonely,” said Miguel, a member of the Church of the Annunciation Parish in Shelbyville, Ky., in the Archdiocese of Louisville. “Then I realized there was somebody who knew more about me than I do myself. God has been there for me from day one.

“I asked him to promise me to help me through everything I was going through. I heard something pop into my head—‘I promise.’ I actually did cry when that happened. I cried tears of joy.”

At 16, Valentina Chavez has the same deep love of her faith that brought so many Catholic youths to NCYC.

“For most of us, our faith has always been there for us since we were born,” said Valentina, a member of St. Patrick Parish in Indianapolis. “It’s something we’ve learned to love and appreciate, thanks to our parents. We’re very blessed to have a very supportive parish and families to help us get involved in church.”

Still, she says, the teenage years are a time of challenge in many youths’ lives in regard to their faith.

“Especially at our age, as teenagers, we get judged a lot about our faith,” Valentina said. “A lot of people don’t have the same faith as us. Coming from our youth group, we have a strong faith, but it does get difficult at times. We remind ourselves that God is with us.”

It’s a feeling that resonated with many of the youths attending NCYC this year.

“We’re here for a reason,” Valentina said. “And God is always here for us.” †

## NCYC deepens the faith of adult leaders as they help to bring youths closer to God

By John Shaughnessy

Angela Guynn always marvels at the transformation that youths experience during the three days of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis.

“What they believe they’re going to get out of it is different than what they will get out of it,” said Guynn, a youth group leader at St. Rita Parish in Indianapolis who has helped chaperone teenagers at several of the youth conferences.

“Just that there are kids the same age who believe it’s OK to show their love of God, to share what they believe without being judged, that there are others who have questions about their faith, and others they can lean on.”

Guynn smiled as she recalled the experience of one youth from her predominantly African-American parish, a youth whose only initial reason for coming to NCYC was because his mother had signed him up to attend.

“The energy from that first night is eye-opening, from the music to the kids storming the stage. For him it was, ‘I love this! I can’t wait to do this again!’”

That energy—and that reaction from the youths—fuels Guynn’s commitment to bring more teenagers to the conference which takes place every two years. And seeing NCYC’s impact on their faith also deepens her faith.

“With everything that’s been changing in the world, just helping the youths along in their journey helps me in continuing my faith,” she said. “It feels good to help others grow in their faith.”

That feeling is prevalent among adult group leaders and chaperones who embrace NCYC as a faith-affirming experience for their youths and themselves.

Mike Sylvester led 23 youths from St. Gregory the Great Parish in Bluffton, S.C.

“Coming from South Carolina, where the population is 5% or so Catholic, for

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Youth minister Mike Sylvester of St. Gregory the Great Parish in Bluffton, S.C., towers above some of the 23 youths he led at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

## Adoration leads teens to experience 'the true love of God'

By Natalie Hoefler

For many youths, group eucharistic adoration on the second night of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) is the part of the event they look most forward to and find most memorable.

And it is indeed memorable. For as raucous as the energy of nearly 11,000 spirited, joyful teens is, just as palpable is their reverent silence when kneeling together before Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

The juxtaposition became especially clear throughout the evening of Nov. 19 in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis as the evening began with upbeat Christian music, leading the young people to jump and sing along.

But as soon as the Eucharist was processed into the space, the party-like atmosphere changed. Kneeling, the youths watched in silence as the monstrance was placed on an altar.

### 'He wants to feed us with himself'

The next hour was consumed in silence and reverent music, broken only by the occasional voice of Father Leo Patalinghug, the priest-member of a community of consecrated life called *Voluntas Dei* ("The Will of God") who led the adoration service.

First, he helped the young people enter into conversation with Christ.

"Can Jesus really squeeze his body into this small piece of bread? Can he really squeeze his blood into wine?" he asked. "Truly he wants to feed us with himself.

He wants to dwell in us because he made us so beautiful.

"Let Jesus tell you how he sees your life, not in condemnation but in how beautiful he made you."

After time for quiet reflection, Father Leo spoke about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He shared how scientists who studied consecrated hosts from eucharistic miracles determined two things.

"One thing that scientists were able to discern is that the blood type is AB+ like on the Shroud of Turin, making it a universal recipient—anyone can take that blood type and make it their own," he explained.

"They also discovered very impressively that when the host turned to flesh, that it was actually myocardial tissue—heart muscle.

"Could it be, then, that the traditional prayer, 'Jesus Christ, make my heart like unto thine?' that it is real? Could it be



*Voluntas Dei* Father Leo Patalinghug speaks during adoration on the second night of the National Catholic Youth Conference in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 19. (Photos by Natalie Hoefler)

that when we say at Mass, 'We lift up our hearts up to the Lord,' that it's a mutual exchange—I give you my heart Lord, because my heart is broken, and he gives us his?

"Think in your heart what needs to be healed in your life today. Let Jesus in as the divine physician."

More reflection and music followed before Father Leo's final words to the youths.

"I would ask you if you want to become a saint, and you might say, 'Ain't no way I'm going to become a saint.' And that's because the devil is lying to you and you are listening to him," he said.

"With Christ, all things are possible. You can be a saint—you are supposed to be a saint.

"In your heart, ask Jesus to root out whatever needs to be rooted out of your heart, to have the strength to go to confession, to put in you the virtue to be holy and to give you holy friends and people to get back on the right track."

### 'My soul was filled here'

The impact of the encounter with Christ was visible. Hands were folded and heads were bowed in prayer. Tears streaked down the cheeks of some, while others raised their hands in praise.

"I just opened up and really felt Jesus here tonight," said Annalise Bird, 18, of the Diocese of Syracuse, N.Y. "It's a feeling I'll always cherish."

Ryan Perez, 17, of the Archdiocese of Baltimore said it was "so powerful seeing so many people come together to worship our God. The Spirit in the room



A teen bows her head in prayer during adoration in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 19 during the National Catholic Youth Conference.

was just overflowing. It was really a life-changing experience."

During one point in adoration, 17-year-old Jaidn Asch of the Syracuse Diocese stood and hugged those on either side of him.

"My soul was just filled," he said. "That led me to feel the true love of God, which made me want to just spread his love to others. Me and my friend here have been close for a while and I wanted to show love to him, and to my brother here, just having this feeling that my soul was filled.

"I go about my day and I get busy, and I'm trying to prove my worth. My soul gets empty, but my soul was filled here. It's something I've been chasing my whole life." †



Youths kneel and pray during adoration in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 19 during the National Catholic Youth Conference.

## Keeping the Fire Alive



Transitional Deacon Michael Clawson, a member of Annunciation Parish in Brazil, proclaims a Gospel reading during a morning prayer service that was part of the Saturday morning general session of the National Catholic Youth Conference on Nov. 20 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)



Befitting the theme of "Ablaze" for the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 18-20, images of fire flash above a stage on the floor of Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis during the opening session on Nov. 18 for the nearly 11,000 youths from across the country. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)



Amy Smith, a chaperone for a group of youths from the Diocese of Des Moines, Iowa, kneels in prayer on Nov. 20 during the closing Mass of the National Catholic Youth Conference at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)



Youths from Holy Family Parish in New Albany wave their arms while music is performed before the start of the Saturday morning general session of the National Catholic Youth Conference on Nov. 20 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)



Youths from across the country take turns adding their unique style to spelling out NCYC at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 18. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)



Youths take a break from the talks to enjoy coloring in the Interactive Village during the National Catholic Youth Conference in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 19. (Photo by Natalie Hoefler)



Youths play Human Hungry Hippo in the Interactive Village during the National Catholic Youth Conference in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 19. (Photo by Natalie Hoefler)



A priest hears the confession of a National Catholic Youth Conference participant on Nov. 20 in a ballroom of the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)



As the keynote speaker of the opening session of the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 18 in Lucas Oil Stadium, Catholic evangelist Chika Anyanwu shares her story of saying yes to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and how it transformed her life. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

# Archdiocesan teens enjoy 'amazing experience' of NCYC opening Mass

By Natalie Hoefler

The National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) had barely begun by mid-afternoon on Nov. 18, but already the hallways of the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis were coming to life with excited, silly-hat-wearing teens from around the country.

Not so in one conference hall. There, about 900 youths from all over central and southern Indiana chose to start their NCYC experience by worshipping together at an opening archdiocesan Mass with Archbishop Charles C. Thompson.

The large hall went from silence to song as the archbishop, about 13 priests and more than 25 seminarians processed toward the altar located atop a stage.

"Life, as they say, is full of choices," Archbishop Thompson said during his homily. "Choices of course have consequences. On a regular basis, confronted with opportunity and challenge, we make choices. Sometimes we make choices between good and evil. Other times we make choices between seemingly equally good options, or so-called lesser of evils."

The archbishop noted that each of those present made an intentional choice to be at NCYC.

"The consequences of this choice hopefully include strengthening our Catholic identity, deepening our faith, meeting new friends and having a memorable experience," he said. "The ultimate consequence, however, will be a personal and even deeper personal encounter with Jesus Christ in the various ways that are made available during this NCYC."

Archbishop Thompson acknowledged that youths today are faced with many sources "wanting your loyalty, wanting



National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) participants kneel in reverence as Archbishop Charles C. Thompson processes with the Blessed Sacrament through the Indiana Convention Center at the beginning of NCYC on Nov. 18. (Photos by Natalie Hoefler)

you to sacrifice to false gods rather than the true God we worship here at this altar. ... The overwhelming array of voices vying for our attention and dedication can be deafening at times."

He cautioned the teens to resist such messages. Instead, he said, "We need to be grounded in prayer, in the word of God, reflection, sacraments, discernment and service.

"These ways of discerning and praying allow us to encounter the person of Jesus Christ in our lives, in our relationships, in our families and in our communities."

He said the choices Catholics make should reflect and honor "the choice God made for our salvation," and Jesus freely choosing "to accept the Father's will, entering into his passion and death, trusting in the ultimate outcome of the Resurrection."

"Choices have consequences," he reminded the youths. "Many consequences can be long lasting, some even eternal.

"Let us not squander the opportunity to draw closer to the Lord during these special days at NCYC. May the choices we make here lead us to an



Archbishop Charles C. Thompson delivers a homily to nearly 900 youths of the archdiocese at the beginning of the National Catholic Youth Conference in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 18.

ever-deepening encounter with the person of Jesus Christ our Savior, and continue to have lasting consequences of peace, joy, faith, hope and blessings despite the burdens and crosses we must carry in this life. ...

"We have chosen to be here. Let the consequences begin."

During Archbishop Thompson's closing remarks, a long, loud cheer erupted after he shared with those present the news of the archdiocese hosting a national eucharistic congress in 2024.

He then prepared them for the eucharistic procession through and outside of the Indiana Convention Center that would take place after the Mass.

"We talk about the Indy 500 and how it's the greatest spectacle in racing," he said. "Well, it doesn't compare to the Eucharist. What a great message it is, what a great spectacle, as we begin this eucharistic procession. The witness we

give in our reverence and our adoration and great respect to the Eucharist—but not only to the Eucharist, but how we live out this eucharistic experience in our lives."

Evan Sahlstrom of the Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau, Alaska, took part in the eucharistic procession. The 17-year-old found it "really touching to see everyone drop what they were doing and kneel. I really enjoyed seeing the Knights of Columbus out [along the street] with their swords raised to reverence the Eucharist."

After the procession and adoration, 18-year-old Hanna Helt of St. Joseph University Parish in Terre Haute reflected on the Mass.

"It was honestly amazing, especially with getting to be with all the other teenagers that were there, and hearing [the archbishop] speak," she said. "It was such an amazing and warming experience." †



A eucharistic procession with Archbishop Charles C. Thompson holding a monstrance files past St. John the Evangelist Church in Indianapolis during the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 18.

## Youths at NCYC rush to fill a Box of Joy for children—and other service projects

By John Shaughnessy

Charlotte Wiman and Aidan Sauls kept quickly returning to fill another Box of Joy for a child who wouldn't otherwise experience the magic of Christmas.

Two thousand boxes needed to be filled with an assortment of gifts—one of the service projects that teenagers at the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) worked on in the conference's Interactive Village on Nov. 18-20.

Charlotte and Aidan smiled at the thought of the boxes being distributed at Christmas to children in need in Central America—boxes that will include a toy, candy, school supplies, socks, a rosary and a coloring book of Jesus, among other items.

"I just feel grateful I can help and give back," said Charlotte, a member of Our Lady of the Hills Parish in Columbia, S.C., the same parish as Aidan. "It will show them that God loves them."

Aidan added, "It really makes you view Christmas from a different perspective. I come from a middle-class family, and I get a lot. I realize there are people in the world who don't. It feels good helping them. I hope that person will feel the love."

The enthusiasm of Charlotte and Aidan is exactly the reaction that was hoped for by Terry Waters, the special initiatives manager for Cross Catholic Outreach, a nonprofit organization that coordinated the Box of Joy effort and two other service projects at NCYC. About 75,000 food packages were made for families in Guatemala. Another 7,500 food packets will be distributed to Indianapolis area food pantries by the Knights of Columbus.

"For us and for the youths, this is a wonderful opportunity to live out our faith, to put our faith into action," Waters said. "This Box of Joy is what we call a two-way ministry. It's the joy of serving, and it gives others the joy of experiencing Christmas."

The 2,000 boxes of joy from NCYC are part of an overall effort across the country to provide a touch of Christmas to more than 100,000 children in Central America, Waters noted.

"For the kids who get a Box of Joy, this is their Christmas gift. It's the only gift they will get," he said. "All three projects are corporal works of mercy. They'll make a difference in the lives of families."

In a nearby area, Ava Keicher and Bella Doyle of the Diocese of Buffalo, N.Y., used their talents for a service project called Hands Across Haiti. The effort is a ministry of St. John Paul II Parish in Sellersburg. Youths decorated backpacks, totes and T-shirts that will be shared with members of two parishes in Haiti that have a special "sister" connection to St. John Paul II Parish.



Charlotte Wiman, left, and Aidan Sauls of Our Lady of the Hills Parish in Columbia, S.C., are all smiles as they help with the Box of Joy service project at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 19. (Photos by John Shaughnessy)

"I went on a trip to the Dominican Republic with my high school, and the fact that Haiti is so close to there touched my heart. I know how much they go through," said Ava, a senior at Sacred Heart Academy in Buffalo and a member of Immaculate Conception Parish in nearby East Aurora, N.Y.

Bella added, "I like that these are going to people who need clothing. I think that getting something that was pretty would make them see the spirit of God."

At another area, Paloma Escobedo cut pieces of fabric with three of her friends—Valentina Chavez, Monserrat Gomez and Maria Sanchez. The fabric pieces will be sewn together to create bags for the Christmas Store in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis—an annual effort by Catholic Charities Indianapolis to bring a touch of Christmas joy to families in need. The bags will be filled with hygiene products for parents, complementing the toys and other gifts the children get.

"Cutting fabric is actually pretty fun," said Paloma, a member of St. Patrick Parish in Indianapolis. "It makes me feel good I'm helping out and someone will appreciate what we're doing."

It's the double blessing of service projects. †



Bella Doyle, left, and Ava Keicher show the totes they made for people in Haiti, part of the Hands Across Haiti service project at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 19.

## Wacky hats still reign at NCYC, but messages show the heart of youths' faith

By John Shaughnessy

Masks were required at the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis, but wacky hats still reigned on Nov. 18-20, adding an extra touch of joy that has always marked this celebration of the young Church.

Once again, there were youths donning racecar hats, cowboy hats and brightly-colored umbrella hats. Maybe the best were the KFC red-and-white-striped bucket hats proudly worn by the group from Church of the Annunciation Parish in Shelbyville, Ky.—a tip of their hat to Harlan Sanders, the founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken who once lived in their community.

While the colorful hats proclaim fun, another part of the youths' attire reveals the heart of how they embrace and live their Catholic faith. That more serious side is displayed in the messages that appear on some of the

T-shirts and sweatshirts they wear. Here's a sampling from this year's conference:

"Faith does not make things easy. It makes them possible."

"Be who God meant you to be and set the world on fire."

"All I need is a little bit of coffee and a whole lot of Jesus."

"*Nunc Coepi*," (the translation of this Latin phrase means "Now I begin.")

"Comfort Like Veronica"

"Lead Like Joan"

"Accept Like Mary"

"As iron sharpens iron, one person sharpens another. Proverbs 27:17"

"I am the pro-life generation"

"Be not afraid"

"Child of God"

"Church is not just something you go to. It's a family you belong to."

"Child of God"

"Blessed." †



Youths used messages on T-shirts and sweatshirts to show their Catholic faith, including their support for pro-life concerns. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)



Father Andy Hammeke of the Diocese of Salina, Kan., hears the confession of a National Catholic Youth Conference participant on Nov. 20 in a ballroom of the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis. (Photos by Sean Gallagher)

## God's mercy flows through the sacrament of penance at NCYC

By Sean Gallagher

The nearly 11,000 youths may have just come from Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis rocking with loud music, cheering and flashing bright lights.

But all of that disappeared the instant they set foot in a large, dimly lit and quiet ballroom in the Indiana Convention Center.

Pairs of chairs dotted the expansive room, some with cloth screens dividing

them, others arranged close together so that the two people sitting in them could see each other.

This was the room where dozens of priests shared God's mercy in the sacrament of penance with thousands of participants during the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) on Nov. 18-20 in Indianapolis.

Whenever the room was open, a steady, long line of penitents waited to be directed to a priest who could celebrate

the sacrament of penance with them.

Seminarians directed penitents to chairs while other volunteers guided people in the confession lines and handed "I'm forgiven" stickers to those leaving the room after receiving sacramental absolution of their sins.

This year's NCYC was the fourth at which Tara Donovan of the Diocese of Des Moines, Iowa, volunteered as a chaperone. But talking about the reconciliation room still moved her.

"It's amazing," said Donovan through tears. "As parents, we try to guide our kids to make right choices. But you can only do so much. I'm just really glad that the kids are making themselves available and giving it all up to God."

This was the second NCYC for Kellie Simon, a teenager from Abingdon, Md., in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Taking the opportunity to experience God's mercy in the sacrament of penance at the conference is important for her.

"It's such a different experience than going [to confession] at your own church," Kellie said. "You get to speak to a priest you've never met before."

"It's such a peaceful entrance with the dim lights and music in the background. And you get to see a ton of youths also doing the same exact thing. It really makes you feel welcome and to know that you're not the only one. To see all the youths around you, all believing the same thing you do, is really a wonderful experience."

It's also a wonderful experience for the priests hearing confessions at the

conference, said Father Raphael Assamah of the Diocese of Des Moines, Iowa.

"It's a great opportunity and a great sacrifice," he said. "It tells you how the young people want to reconcile themselves with God. They may have a broken relationship with him and are finding ways with [coming to know] themselves and reconciling themselves with God and the Church."

Father James Brockmeier, pastor of St. Mary Parish in Rushville, came to NCYC on the closing day of the conference to hear confessions, as he has done at previous NCYC's since being ordained in 2016.

"One of the neatest things about a conference like this is that people come to confession who haven't been to confession in a long time, many times," he said.

Father Brockmeier also noted that conferences like NCYC can lead to powerful experiences of the sacrament of penance because many of the event presentations help prepare participants for confession.

"People will be inspired by what's going on at the conference, the talks," Father Brockmeier said. "It kind of acts as a giant examination of conscience."

"Everything here helps people to be focused on making a confession of their faith, which confession certainly is. They're confessing sins, but they're also confessing their trust that God forgives them and loves them."

That certainly was the case for Kellie. "It helps me to remember that God loves me no matter what," she said. †



A priest hears the confession of a National Catholic Youth Conference participant on Nov. 20 in a ballroom of the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis.

## Talk on trusting God helps teens see 'God controls everything'

By Natalie Hoefler

Maxwell Benefield admitted it—he has control issues, and that leads to trust issues.

So the 18-year-old National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) participant from the Diocese of Nashville, Tenn., attended a talk called “Trusting in God” by Catholic singer, songwriter and speaker Steve Angrisano.

“It was a really good talk,” he said.

Here’s a look at the heart of the session’s message.

### ‘Nothing fills us except for God’

Angrisano began by posing a question from God to those present: “Do you know me?” That’s the question God has for every one of us.”

He quoted from saints who commented on trust in God.

“I have a holy card from my first youth rally,” he said. “It says, ‘There is a God-shaped vacuum in your heart that only God can fill.’ It’s a paraphrase of the words of St. Augustine, which are, ‘Our hearts will be restless until they rest in you.’

“What it means is, you were created by God and for God. ... No music, no sport, no boyfriend, no girlfriend, no good thing, no bad thing—nothing fills us except for God.”

Angrisano also quoted St. John Chrysostom’s words on the trust of the early Christians.

“What does it mean that the Apostles were so bold, that these men who abandoned him when he was alive would stand for him at the risk of death after he died?” he quoted from the saint.

Those same men saw Christ resurrected, and their trust in God was sealed, he explained.

Angrisano noted that the Church “began with a small community of people who were given a choice: ‘Say it’s not true, or you will be burned alive.’ That’s the truth. Those are the origins of our faith,” an origin founded on faith in Christ and in what the Apostles professed.

### The ‘reckless love of God’

Catholics are called not just to trust in God but also to trust in God’s love, said Angrisano.

“Genesis 1:27 says that you and I and not anything else were created in the image and likeness of God,” he noted.

He played the song “Reckless Love”

by Cory Asbury on his guitar to further illustrate the point, inviting the young people to sing the chorus:

*“Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God.*

*Oh, it chases me down, fights ‘til I’m found, leaves the ninety-nine.*

*I couldn’t earn it, and I don’t deserve it, still, You give Yourself away.”*

Angrisano reminded the youths that “God desires to know you and be in friendship with you. That’s the word [St.] Paul used in Latin, not ‘relationship.’ Jesus wants to be in friendship with us.”

He noted that friends come to know each other well by “wasting time together.”

“So how do we know God?” he asked.

“We waste time with God. ... That means praying because you know what praying is? ... Prayer is wasting time with God.

Prayer is about taking meaningful minutes of your day and letting God be God in your life, and then we begin to understand God and we begin to see his way in our life.

“You don’t have to pray for long hours,” he said before leading those present in a *lectio divina* meditation.

“If you have a long ride on the bus to school, just pull up the daily Gospel on your phone, read it, and reflect on the one word or phrase that jumps out at you.”

### ‘There is no fear in love’

Session emcee Donna Catherine and musician Thomas Muglia shared witnesses after Angrisano’s talk.

Catherine spoke of the plans she had for her life and the resistance and lack of control she felt when she sensed God calling her to a life of ministry.

“It’s either us hiding from God or running from him, never him running or hiding from us,” she said.

Muglia noted it was difficult to accept God’s love.

“As humans, we like conditional love,” he said. “The concept of not earning it, just being loved for who you are by God, that’s kind of a scary thing.

“But that has to be the foundation, it has to be. Imagine what we might have the courage to be and do in this world with God’s love as our foundation—not our efforts, but God’s love.

“[1] John 4 says there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear. ... We love because he first loved us.”



Steve Angrisano talks to teens about trusting in God during a National Catholic Youth Conference session in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 19. (Photos by Natalie Hoefler)

### ‘I can’t control everything’

Shayla Drimsley, 14, of the Diocese of New Ulm, Minn., said she was glad she attended the talk.

“I liked how they had songs and made it so it was really understandable for us to get [the message] better,” she said. The talk helped her realize “that God will help you. Even if you think he can’t, he will. You can believe it or not, but he will.”

As for Maxwell, he appreciated

Angrisano’s humor, but especially related to Catherine’s witness.

“What she said about wanting everything to be controlled, I could really relate to that,” he said. “I feel like prayer and relying on God has a lot to do with controlling that urge to control. That really spoke to me.

“I can’t control everything. God controls everything, so if I rely on him, it will put me on the right path.” †



Teens do hand motions to a song prior to a talk on trust during the National Catholic Youth Conference in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 19.

## Youth-led sessions help teens connect, create action plan for life after NCYC

By Natalie Hoefler

Face masks were not the only thing new at the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis this year.

New on the schedule of optional activities were youth-led sessions called “Youth 2 Youth” and “Spirited Conversations.” Each was offered several times, with a different youth group from around the country taking ownership of the session.

When registering teens from Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Anniston, Ala., to attend NCYC, Ricardo Amaral noticed the option for his group to lead a youth session.

“I didn’t know what it was, but I thought, ‘Sure, why not?’” said Amaral, an assistant to the parish’s youth minister.

He signed the group up to lead a 30-minute Spirited Conversations session. According to a description of Spirited Conversations in the NCYC app, these “roundtables offer a space for young people to pause for reflection and further discussion about the different topics and themes being shared in general sessions and breakout sessions.”

“We were really surprised because he signed us up before we came here, and we didn’t even know!” said his 17-year-old daughter Anna Amaral. “We planned it before we left. It was fun!”

Ricardo Amaral said the four teens of their group “did everything—they came up with the instructions, the questions for discussion, the group activity. They led the prayers, they spoke at the podium. We adults were there if anyone needed help, but the girls did all the work.”

The teens split the session participants into groups with members from various dioceses.

“You spent sometimes 12 hours on a bus talking with your best friends” on the way to NCYC,” Ricardo Amaral told *The Criterion*. “You know what they think already. When you force the situation a little bit, you expose them to new ideas.”

One of the teens leading explained to the participants that the ultimate goal of the session was for the participants to come up with concrete ways they could put into action at home what they learned at NCYC.

The groups were asked to discuss their favorite thing about NCYC up to that point, what session messages most impacted them and why, what was the most important thing they’d learned, and how those ideas could be put into practice back home.

“I got a lot of things out of it when we were planning it,” said Anna. “Delving into the questions, at first we were just scraping the surface, giving simple answers.”

“But after we started talking a little more, we started seeing more ideas, thinking of more in-depth answers. Like, instead of just saying we can go to church on Sunday, we started talking about how we could reach out to non-profits and volunteer, or even just get involved in our parish.”

After discussing the questions, each group was asked to list on a poster their main NCYC takeaways and how they can implement them. Photos of each group were taken and posted on social media.

Tessa Fellona, a 16-year-old member of the Archdiocese of the Military Services from Abilene, Texas, summarized the discussion at her table, which included



Abilene, Texas, residents Adeline Fellona, left, and her sisters Tessa and Margaux, fourth and fifth from left, of the Archdiocese of the Military Services, pose on Nov. 19 with the poster they and members of the archdioceses of Atlanta, Chicago and Indianapolis made of their take-aways from NCYC in Indianapolis and how they can put them into action. (Photo by Natalie Hoefler)

youths from the archdioceses of Chicago, Atlanta and Indianapolis.

“The people at our table really liked the community here, learning and growing with other young people who are in the same situations as them,” she said. “They can really relate to the talks.”

“It’s hard to be a young Catholic these days because so many people beat down on you and say, ‘You hate who I identify as,’ so it can be hard to relate to kids our age. Coming here, it’s crazy to see how many people are in the same boat as we are.”

Making connections among their peers was one aspect of the Spirited Conversations that excited Ricardo.

“The important thing of this exercise was the communication between the different people that came,” he said. “That communication is extremely important, extremely. By talking, you can see how you’re not the only one who feels the same way about certain things.”

He was also thrilled to see youths have the opportunity to take leadership at NCYC. †

## NCYC talk shows compatibility of science and faith

By Natalie Hoefler

Many talks at the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) address hot topics, particularly those where Catholic teaching comes into conflict with the secular world.

The talk “Faith, Science and the Gift of Wonder” addressed the fallacy that faith and science are incompatible.

“Today, most scientists see that science can inform faith and faith can inform science,” said speaker Dr. Bradley Gregory, associate professor of biblical studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

But many in the secular world have lagged in that understanding, he said. His talk addressed the history of the

relationship between faith and science in the Church, and how Catholics going forward can recover the traditional Church view of the compatibility of the two topics.

### ‘In the beginning’

Gregory began with a reading of the creation of the world in Genesis, chapter 1.

Of course, he said, “Scripture is not a science textbook. It’s an ancient text trying to communicate things about God, not chemistry or physics.”

When Genesis was written, he said, “Many people thought that the Earth was an unpredictable and unsettling place.

“Genesis, chapter 1, said no to that view of the world. ... For our biblical writers and early Christians, the world was a theater that unveils the goodness, the truth, the beauty of God, not in spite of its natural laws, but precisely through those natural laws.”

The growing Church continued studying the world. By the medieval era, Catholic universities included math and the sciences.

“The Church was open to science and discovering things about the natural world,” said Gregory. “They believed that the natural world in its regularity and its order told them something about the goodness of God.”

### ‘Science can’t answer the meaning of life’

So what happened? How did we get to the place we are today that so many believe that faith and science are opposites of one another?

“A couple hundred years ago, some people started thinking of God as one more character in the theater of a play of the created world,” Gregory explained. “People would look around and would find something else that made something happen, and ruled God out.”

The problem with such thinking, he said, is that “it means every time humanity advances in knowledge, God gets smaller and smaller and smaller, until eventually people think there’s no need for God. We can explain everything or will one day be able to explain everything.

“This left many people with the impression that God is unnecessary if we have science.”

Fortunately, he said, many theologians in the last 150

years have insisted that science and faith are compatible.

“St. John Henry Newman said there is nothing in science that is incompatible with God,” said Gregory. “He said science tells us about the laws and how they work, and faith tells us about the author and maintainer of those laws.

“Pope Pius XII said the scientific advances of the past 200 years have shown us a lot about the bodies we have. He said what science can’t answer for us is the meaning of life and the nature of the soul.

“Pope John Paul II gave full support to the exploration of evolutionary science and the other sciences as things that would shed light on the world we live in.”

### ‘We need to recover a sense of wonder’

To “bring our hearts and imaginations back into alignment or strengthen their alignment with the traditional view of the Catholic Church,” Gregory suggested turning to Pope Francis encyclical, “*Laudato Si’*: On Care for Our Common Home.”

“The major theme of his encyclical is that for us to be right in relation with the created world, we need to recover a sense of wonder,” he said. “We need to stop seeing the world just as something we can exploit or abuse and find amazement that it’s the way God created it.”

Gregory closed with impressing upon the youths that “faith is critical to all intellectual work. All truth is God’s truth, and when you pursue it, it’s your wonder that will lead you to find God’s handiwork.”

### ‘It shows how he loves us’

Margaux Fellona is an 18-year-old member of the Archdiocese of the Military Services from Abilene, Texas, who loves Church history.

“I think it was really interesting,” she said. “I think it’s really important that we recognize the Church’s history and continue the traditions.”

Andrea Cox, 15, of the Diocese of Wichita, Kan., said she walked away from the talk with a sense of awe for “how God made nature and how He made us, even.

“I really appreciated the talk. It made me think about the beauty of the Earth God made for us, and it shows how much he loves us.” †



Dr. Bradley Gregory, assistant professor of biblical studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington, talks to youths at the National Catholic Youth Conference about the compatibility of faith and science in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 19. (Photo by Natalie Hoefler)

## NCYC presents a positive vision of the priesthood for Catholic youths

By Sean Gallagher

“Follow me to arm wrestle a seminarian! See if you can beat a man who receives Communion every day!”

Holding a chalk board with “Arm Wrestle a Seminarian” written on it, seminarian Samuel Hansen barked this and similar calls while walking through the crowded halls of the Indiana Convention Center on the afternoon of Nov. 20 during the final day of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC).

“It was incredibly fun,” said Hansen, a senior at Bishop Simon Bruté College Seminary and a member of St. Roch Parish, both in Indianapolis. “Just walking with the sign made a lot of people laugh. I felt like a ballpark food salesman. But it energized the convention center quite a bit.”

In response to Hansen’s hawking, a steady group of challengers gathered around a table promoting vocations to the diocesan priesthood that had earlier attracted fewer visitors when the seminarians manning it waited for NCYC participants to come to them on their own.

As lighthearted and winsome as this strategy to attract attention was, Hansen saw it as following in the tradition of the saints. St. John Bosco, for example, did slight of hand tricks and juggling acts for the children in his village to get them to listen to him give a catechesis lesson.

“The saints stepped out of line and took extraordinary actions to inspire others,” Hansen said. “That’s exactly what Catholic youths need to know about the vocation [to the priesthood]. It’s not a day job. It’s not for the faint of heart. Enthusiasm is necessary, and we need to reflect that.”

Archdiocesan seminarians were present to NCYC participants in other ways. Those in the last four years of their priestly formation wore clerical attire in being a candidate for the priesthood.

“Wearing clerics makes [seminarians] that much more obvious,” said seminarian Tyler Huber, a member of St. Mary-of-the-Knobs Parish in Floyd County. “When you’re walking around the thematic park and you engage in conversations with kids, playing games with them, they think it’s awesome. You show them that this is a viable option for them. Young people are doing it. It’s joyful. Jesus will provide for

you. It’s going to be a wonderful life.”

At the same time, Huber was encouraged during a time of eucharistic adoration at the conference in Lucas Oil Stadium when dozens of priests were available in the arena’s concourse to hear confessions of participants.

Huber helped direct participants to the priests sitting in chairs.

“In my section alone, I looked down and saw four or five guys who are now priests that I’ve been in seminary with,” Huber said. “They were now the guys in the chairs—and they loved it. I got so excited. And they were in heaven. To see them thrive and do well in ministry, having a good relationship with their youth groups, getting the kids excited about the faith, celebrating the sacraments—it’s all awesome.”

Huber is in his third year of theological formation at Saint Meinrad and expects to be ordained a transitional deacon next spring.

“My next NCYC will be as a priest, which is awesome,” Huber said with palpable enthusiasm.

Father James Brockmeier knows that feeling.

He was a high school student when he first attended NCYC.

“It was such a new experience to be with 20,000 other young Catholics, to experience the Mass in something bigger than your own parish and your own experience of it,” said Father Brockmeier, pastor of St. Mary Parish in Rushville. “Seeing all of the priests process into the Mass was one of the things that really got me thinking about the priesthood.”

In 2015, Father Brockmeier, as a seminarian and transitional deacon, experienced a “full circle moment” when he served as the principal deacon at the closing Mass of NCYC and took part in the same procession that had so impressed him earlier.

The same day that Father Brockmeier described his full circle moment, it may have been beginning for NCYC participant Matthew Heidenreich of the Columbus, Ohio, Diocese, who first attended the conference in 2019.

“It’s inspirational at the Saturday night Mass to see so many priests [processing] down the aisle,” Matthew said. “As someone who’s discerning the seminary, you have to ask the question, ‘What if that



Seminarian Alex Lindbergh, a freshman at Bishop Bruté College Seminary in Indianapolis, arm wrestles Asia Carmon of the Diocese of Raleigh, N.C., during the National Catholic Youth Conference on Nov. 20 at the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis. (Photos by Sean Gallagher)

was me? What if I was walking down that aisle?”

Returning to the conference this year to celebrate the sacrament of penance with Catholic teenagers from across the country, Father Brockmeier spoke of the benefits of dozens of priests coming to minister together at NCYC.

“The priesthood is something that we do communally,” he said. “A lot of times we feel like individuals at our parishes. But we are brother priests. To be able to come and hear confessions with brother priests is a reminder of the communal nature of our ministry.”

Father Brockmeier also serves as an archdiocesan associate vocations director who works with Father Michael Keucher, the vocations director for the archdiocese.

Father Keucher took part in NCYC this year—the seventh such conference he’s



Dozens of priests process on Nov. 20 into Luca Oil Stadium in Indianapolis for the closing Mass of the National Catholic Youth Conference.

attended. He sees it as a tremendous time to invite young people to begin discerning the vocation to which God has called them.

“Once kids open the door of their hearts to the Holy Spirit, he makes his will known,” said Father Keucher. “The Holy Spirit is so palpable here. It’s so real. And the kids are finding the Holy Spirit and nurturing their relationship with the Holy Spirit. That will do wonders for vocations.” †

## Catholic youths encounter a variety of religious orders at NCYC

By Sean Gallagher

Several religious communities had booths in the Interactive Village of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) on Nov. 18-20 in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis.

Franciscan Sister Kathleen Branham, vocations director for the Sisters of



Society of Our Lady of the Trinity Sister Mary Claire Strasser, left, chats with Sofia Sauls, center, and Ava Glemming, both of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, Okla. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)

St. Francis in Oldenburg, said she had more young women express interest in her religious community than at NCYC in 2019.

“There are more people who want to stay in touch,” she said. “It’s been a blessing. The young people of today want community. I think [NCYC] plays a really big part with community. After the pandemic, they realize that there’s more to life than materialistic and consumer stuff and that community means everything.”

Society of Our Lady of the Trinity Sister Mary Claire Strasser was one of three members of her community at the conference.

“It’s a beautiful chance to encounter [youths] and to let them encounter us,” she said. “We’ve met many who have never seen or talked to sisters before. For us, it’s a sign of hope. This is the future of the Church. It’s really beautiful.”

Describing NCYC as an

event “where their faith is encouraged and strengthened,” Sister Mary Claire said that “the Lord gives a lot of grace in events like this” for Catholic teenagers.

“There are a lot of graced moments of deep encounter with Christ,” she said. “Those deep encounters open their hearts to this God that loves them and has a plan for their lives. What might that plan be?”

Holy Cross Brother Jacob Eifred, who is in his third year of temporary vows with the Congregation of the Holy Cross, said he is encouraged in his discernment and formation by NCYC. He also saw hope in the conference for the future of religious vocations.

“When youths come to an event like this, they’re reminded that they’re not alone,” said Brother Jacob. “The Church is much bigger than just their parish. There’s a lot of opportunity out there for ministry, evangelization and growing in their faith. They can be supported by like-minded people. We’re all in this together in the Church.”

Matthew Heidenreich of the Columbus,

Ohio, Diocese stopped by the Holy Cross booth and chatted with Holy Cross Father Brendan McAleer, the vocations director for the order’s U.S. province.

Matthew said that NCYC brings religious orders “into the spotlight a little more.”

“A lot of times as young Catholics, it’s almost like religious orders are off on their own,” he said. “They’re mysterious things that we don’t really see. So, being here face-to-face with brothers and sisters and interacting with religious orders is really cool. You get to learn more about their charisms.”

Ava Glemming of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, Okla., echoed such thoughts after visiting the booth of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Trinity.

“Every vocation has a place,” she said. “Every order is different—from Franciscans, to Dominicans, to Benedictines. They’re all different in their own special way. Vocations are all about figuring out what God wants you to do that is unique to you.” †

# Teens reflect on challenges to faith caused by pandemic

By Sean Gallagher

Tessa Junk first experienced the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis in 2019.

Less than four months after the conference, the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S. changed her life of faith, especially with the suspension of the public celebration of the sacraments during the first months of the pandemic.

"I definitely distanced myself from my faith, with not being able to go to church," said Tessa, a student at Sacred Heart Jr./Sr. High School in Salina, Kan. "And I wasn't able to be with Catholic teenagers at my school that I can share my faith with and talk to."

So, returning to NCYC this year was a moving experience for her.

"Yesterday, I was bawling my eyes out all day long," Tessa said of her experience of the first full day of the conference on Nov. 19.

"So, with all of that distancing, coming back here just makes me feel like the Spirit is back in my heart," she said. "I feel like God is holding onto me. I feel loved way more than I have ever felt love before."

Many other youths at NCYC this year who attended the conference in Indianapolis in 2019 echoed Tessa's experience.

"I won't lie," said Kellie Simon of Abingdon, Md. "Going through the pandemic put a strain on my faith, especially with not being able to go to

Mass every weekend, having to [watch] it online. I thought about why God put us through all of this."

"The most challenging thing was when we had to watch Mass on TV," agreed Emma Donovan of Hazel Green, Wis. "It was easy to get distracted and not pay attention as much when we were in the comfort of our own home rather than in a church."

For some, the challenge to their faith during the pandemic ran even deeper.

Shelby Mai of Salina, Kan., said she didn't go to Mass as often after parishes started reopening.

"I lost touch with my faith, even though I go to a Catholic school," she said.

Coming to NCYC this year with many friends from her parish and Catholic high school, though, made a difference for Shelby.

"This has helped me grow in my faith," she said.



Youths from Holy Family Parish in New Albany take in the sights and sounds of the Saturday morning general session of the National Catholic Youth Conference on Nov. 20 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (Photos by Sean Gallagher)

Matthew Heidenreich of the Columbus, Ohio, Diocese said that he may have been in the minority among NCYC participants in noting that his faith grew stronger during the pandemic.

He and about 20 friends met daily on the online video conference platform Zoom during the height of the pandemic to talk about their faith and have one of the group members give a presentation.

"It gave me a chance to root myself more in prayer, because there wasn't much else to do," Matthew said. "I re-centered myself because I had been losing my focus on my faith. So, it was a really good time for me."

Coming to NCYC this year has only increased his positive experience of his faith.

"It's reassuring to see that the community is still here," he said. "Everyone's willing to come back and bear with the confusion and chaos. But we're all still here and united in faith, which is really cool."

Seeing enthusiasm in nearly 11,000 Catholic teenagers at NCYC this year gave hope to Ava Glemming of Epiphany Parish in Oklahoma City, Okla.

"It's rejuvenating," she said. "The Church was in such a quiet, stagnate place in the middle of the pandemic. It was

hard on all of us. So, to see this life again is really magnificent. It's a testament to God's glory and all that he can do for us."

The public suspension of the sacraments, including the Eucharist, helped Jailynn Rowe of Salina, Kan., appreciate the Mass more consciously since parishes reopened.

This was strengthened by her participation in NCYC this year, especially in her experience of eucharistic adoration on the evening of Nov. 19 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

"After this, I'll definitely see going to church and the Eucharist a lot differently. During adoration last night, seeing the priest hold the [monstrance], I was like, 'That's Jesus Christ right there,'" Jailynn said. "So, when I go home, when the priest holds up the host at church, I'm just going to see Jesus."

Whether the pandemic challenged the faith of some, strengthened it in others or has helped them to appreciate it anew, Matthew said that God has brought good out of the hardships of COVID-19.

"A lot of times, all God needs is an occasion," he said. "He needs that door being opened. And the pandemic was that door being kicked open with a sledgehammer." †



Youths from the Diocese of Des Moines, Iowa, cheer while deacons process off the floor of Lucas Oil Stadium on Nov. 20 in Indianapolis at the end of the closing Mass of the National Catholic Youth Conference.

## LEADERS

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our young people to see the larger Church and to be in a stadium worshipping God with so many people from across the country, it's amazing the impact it has on them," said Sylvester, the youth minister of the parish.

"I've lost count of the number of conferences I've been to, but I've seen the way they take it in, the way they own their faith. I'm fed here, too. The faith, the joy and the energy these kids have brings me hope—not just for the future of our Church but for today. These kids are our present now. We need to affirm that as a Church and celebrate it."

Kim Sprague and Lucy Herth have the same belief in the youths of the Church. They combined to lead 100 youths from four parishes in southern Indiana to NCYC this year—All Saints in Dearborn County, St. Lawrence in Lawrenceburg, St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception in Aurora

and St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross in Bright.

"I love witnessing kids experience the larger Church," Sprague said. "They have an authentic joy to be surrounded by peers of the same faith. You witness them just being true to themselves, to making Jesus their friend."

Herth also appreciates the continuing impact that NCYC has on youths after the three-day event ends.

"Any kid who's been to NCYC wants to invite others to the next conference," Herth said. "They have this joy when they see other kids on fire for their faith, and they want to share that joy with others."

Sprague added, "They're not afraid to witness, to be more of a leader."

She has experienced the same impact.

"It breathes new life into my ministry, just in witnessing the kids come alive in their faith," Sprague said. "To see them open up and let the Holy Spirit work in their lives during the three days at NCYC is a blessing."

"It makes it more than worthwhile." †



Lucy Herth, left, and Kim Sprague led a group of 100 youths from four Dearborn County parishes in southern Indiana to the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 18-20. They posed together for this photo at a pre-conference meeting of archdiocesan youth ministers. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)