

NCYC

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Photo by Natalie Hoefer

Special Coverage from *The Criterion* of the National Catholic Youth Conference



Photo by Sean Gallagher



Photo by Natalie Hoefer

Jesus ‘is the king of our hearts,’ Archbishop Perez shares at NCYC’s closing Mass

By Sean Gallagher

Looking out from a sanctuary built on the floor of Lucas Oil Stadium on the 16,000 youths from across the country that came to Indianapolis for the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC), Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson J. Perez shared with them a message of hope he wanted them to nurture in their hearts as they returned to their homes.

“When you feel lost, Jesus is your shepherd,” said Archbishop Perez in his homily during the conference’s closing Mass on Nov. 22. “Remember that. When you feel you’re in darkness, Jesus is your light. When you feel you’re absolutely hungry and your soul is weighed down, Jesus is your bread.”

Jesus, he returned to again and again in his homily on the feast of Christ the King, is the “king of our hearts.”

In reflecting on Christ the King, Archbishop Perez said that he is not a king in the way that the world views such rulers.

“His throne is a cross,” he said. “His crown is not made of gold and gems. It’s made of thorns. He doesn’t wear fancy, beautiful, priceless rings on his hands. He has nails.”

According to the world, Christ’s death on the cross was “the worst of all ways to execute a criminal.”

But, because of Christ’s resurrection, the Church in faith proclaims that his crucifixion was actually a great victory for him and all who believe in him.

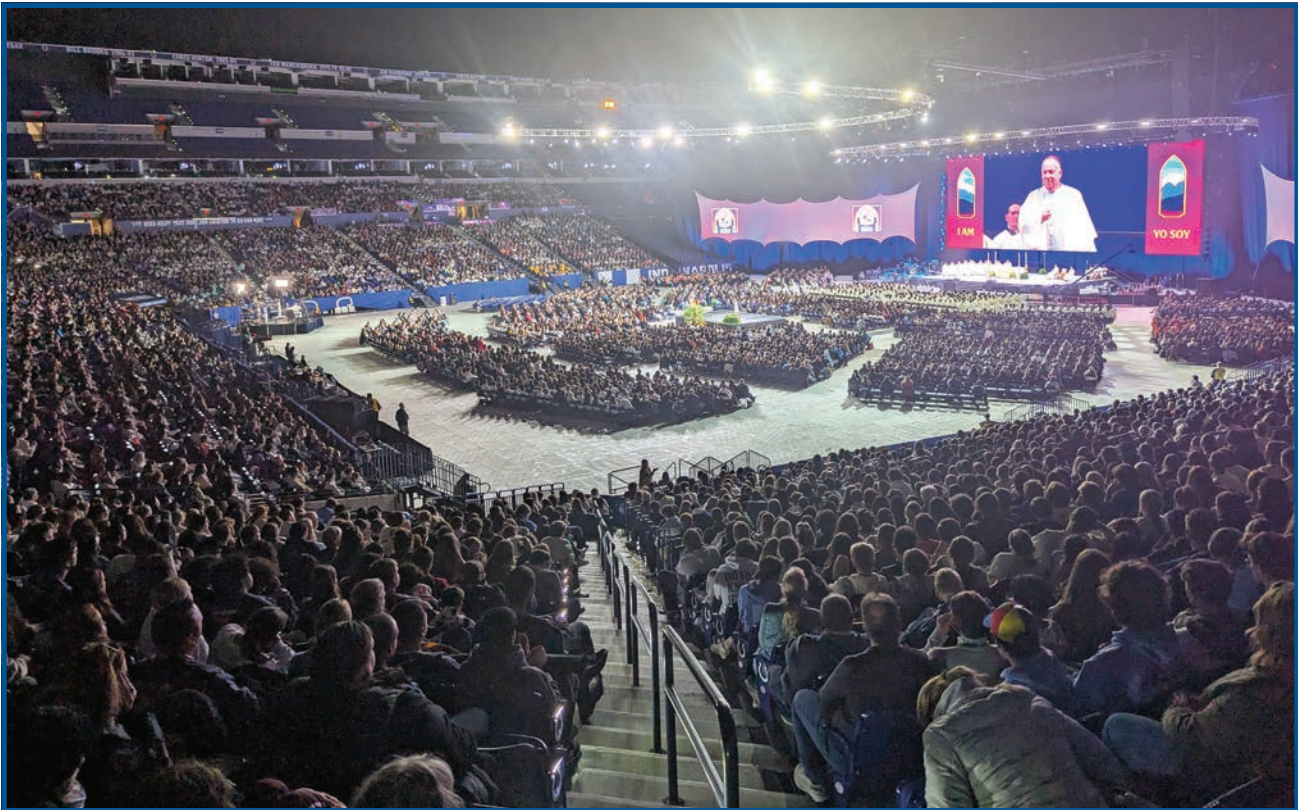
“Goodness has won,” Archbishop Perez said. “Christ the King has already given us victory. We have to embrace that, internalize that and make a part of who we are. And that’s the journey of our Christian life.”

Three times in his homily, Archbishop Perez cried out in a popular and historic phrase in Spanish, “*Viva Cristo Rey!*” (“Long live Christ the King!”). And each time, the congregation cried out the common reply, “*Que viva!*” (“He lives!”).

Because the centerpiece of this year’s NCYC was a nearly hourlong video interaction of the participants with Pope Leo XIV, Archbishop Perez reflected in his homily on parts of the pontiff’s message.



National Catholic Youth Conference participants from the Diocese of Charleston, S.C., kneel in prayer during the event’s closing Mass on Nov. 22 in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.



Some 16,000 Catholic teenagers from across the country worship on Nov. 22 in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis during the closing Mass of the National Catholic Youth Conference. (Photos by Sean Gallagher)

He reminded them in the pope’s words that Jesus “ ‘knows when life feels heavy. Even you do not feel his presence, our faith tells us he is there.’ ”

Archbishop Perez encouraged them in the pope’s words to take “ ‘daily moments of silence ... whether through adoration, or reading Scripture, or simply talking to’ ” Jesus in order to build up a relationship with him and to “ ‘entrust their struggles’ ” to him.

“ ‘Little by little, we learn to hear his voice both from within and through the people he sends us. As you grow closer to Jesus, do not fear what he may ask you for. If he challenges you to make changes in your life, it’s always because he wants to give you a greater joy and freedom. God is never outdone in generosity.’ ”

Archbishop Perez offered a heartfelt prayer at the end of his homily after quoting Pope Leo’s words.

“Thank you, Lord, for the visit of your vicar,” he said. “We are blessed and honored to have had him with us. And thank you, Lord, for being our king, for being the king of our hearts.”

He and the 16,000 youths in the stadium then ended the homily as they had begun it.

“*Viva Cristo Rey!*”
“*Que viva!*”

“*Viva Cristo Rey!*”
“*Que viva!*”
“*Viva Cristo Rey!*”
“*Que viva!*”

The love for Christ that the youths and their chaperones showed during the homily poured forth during Communion when many knelt and raised their hands in prayer, entering into the popular praise and worship music that the conference’s house band played.

And as Archbishop Perez, more than 20 concelebrating bishops and nearly 250 concelebrating priests processed off the stadium’s floor at the end of the closing Mass, the house band struck up again the praise and worship music that filled the hearts of the 16,000 youths who joyfully celebrated their faith.

With the music continuing to play and youths still overflowing with joy in the stadium, Karyna Lopez spoke in a concourse of the stadium with *The Criterion* about her experience of her second NCYC.

“It was so good that I had to come again,” said Karyna, a teenager from the Diocese of Jefferson City, Mo. “The Holy Spirit is very strong here. Everyone is just so inspired for the Lord.”

“I got to meet the Church of today. It’s amazing. There may not be that many [Catholics] at my school, but I know that there are people out there that have the same faith.”

Like many of the other 16,000 teens who attended NCYC, Karyna took memories of her encounter with Pope Leo as she left Lucas Oil Stadium and prepared to return home.

“We got to see the pope,” she said with joy. “It was amazing. He had so much wisdom to share. I’m just glad that I got to experience that.”

(For more photos from NCYC, visit www.archindy.org/ncyc.) †

Like young Church, may we remember Christ will ‘always welcome you home’

Pope Leo XIV had a simple yet profound message for the 16,000 youths who attended the National Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis on Nov. 20-22, telling them, “You are not only the future of the Church, you are the present.”

He added, “Your voices, your ideas, your faith matter right now, and the Church needs you. The Church needs what you have been given to share with all of us.”

The Holy Father’s nearly hourlong virtual dialogue on Nov. 21 was the highlight of this year’s pilgrimage of faith, which featured teenagers ages 14-18 and youth ministers, chaperones, clergy, religious, speakers and volunteers. The questions from five teenagers to the pope touched on themes of technology use, artificial intelligence, forgiveness, hope and the Church’s future.

Elise Wing was one of the five teenagers who shared a

question with Pope Leo, a moment filled with history and hope for her.

“Walking up on that stage felt like history. It really did,” said Elise, who is from the Archdiocese of Dubuque in Iowa. “And I am just so honored and blessed—I mean, the pope said our names.”

The theme of the conference “I am/Yo Soy,” in English and Spanish, was repeated several times during the gathering, including at the opening Mass on Nov. 20 that Archbishop Charles C. Thompson celebrated for the 1,550 archdiocesan youths who attended NCYC.

“Every time I say, ‘Are you ready,’ I want you to respond, ‘I am,’ ” he explained in his homily at the Mass celebrated in the Indiana Convention Center. “And when I say, ‘*Estás listo*,’ you respond, ‘*Yo soy*.’ ”

The stories and photos featured on pages 1B-12B in this week’s issue of *The Criterion* share examples of a young Church that, we pray, moves forward in following the advice and words of wisdom Pope Leo shared with them.

But no matter your age, each of us would do well to remember much of what the Holy Father shared, including allowing Jesus to pick us up when we stumble in living out our vocations.

“It can be discouraging when we fall, but do not focus on all your sins. Look to Jesus,” the pope said. “Trust his mercy and go to him with confidence. He will always welcome you home.”

—Mike Krokos, editor

Pope tells U.S. high school students their voice, ideas, faith matter

VATICAN CITY (CNS)—Pope Leo XIV urged U.S. high school students to be “intentional” with their screen time, their prayer time and their involvement in a local parish.

“One of my own personal heroes, one of my favorite saints, is St. Augustine of Hippo,” the pope told 16,000 young Catholics meeting in Indianapolis. “He searched everywhere for happiness, but nothing satisfied him until he opened his heart to God. That is why he wrote, ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.’”

With a livestream connection, Pope Leo spoke for close to an hour on Nov. 21 with participants at the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) meeting at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

The pope responded to questions from five high school students: Mia Smothers from the Archdiocese of Baltimore; Ezequiel Ponce from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles; Christopher Pantelakis from the Archdiocese of Las Vegas; Micah Alcisto from the Diocese of Honolulu; and Elise Wing from the Archdiocese of Dubuque, Iowa.

The questions were developed in meetings with other students and adults and were sent to the pope in advance.

Pope Leo did respond to a question and comment posed by Katie Prejean McGrady, who was moderating the event. She mentioned that she had given the pope a pair of socks some time ago, and said she wanted to know what he used as an opening word when he played the online game Wordle each day.

“I just want to say I only wear white socks, and I use a different word for Wordle every day, so there’s no set starting word,” the pope said, before turning to the young people’s questions.

Pantelakis asked for the pope’s advice on balancing the use of smartphones and social media with “making faith connections outside of technology.”

Pope Leo, using technology to address the students, listed many good things technology does. For example, “it lets us stay connected with people who are far away,” he said, and there are “amazing tools for prayer, for reading the Bible, for learning more about what we believe, and it allows us to share the Gospel with people we may never meet in person.

“But even with all that, technology can never replace real, in-person relationships; simple things [like] a hug, a handshake, a smile—all those things are essential to being human and to have those things in a real way, not through a screen,” is important.

Pope Leo encouraged the students to follow the example of St. Carlo Acutis, who used technology to spread devotion to the Eucharistic, but limited his time online and made sure he went to Mass, spent time in eucharistic adoration and served the poor.

“Be intentional with your screen time,” the pope told the young people. “Make sure technology serves your life and not the other way around.”

Alcisto asked for advice about using ChatGPT and other forms of artificial intelligence.

While Pope Leo has continued to push AI developers and governments to formulate ethical guidelines and include controls to protect young people, he told the high school students that “safety is not only about rules; it is about education, and it is about personal responsibility. Filters and guidelines can help you, but they cannot make choices for you; only you can do that.

“Using AI responsibly means using it in ways that help you grow, never in ways that distract you from your dignity or your call to holiness,” the pope said. “AI can process information quickly, but it cannot replace human intelligence—and don’t ask it to do your homework for you.”

AI, he said, “will not judge between what is truly right and wrong. And it won’t stand in wonder, in authentic wonder, before the beauty, the beauty of God’s creation. So be prudent. Be wise. Be careful that your use of AI does not limit your true human growth.

“Use it in such a way that if it disappeared tomorrow, you would still know how to think how to create, how to act on your own, how to form authentic friendships,” the pope said. And “remember, AI can never replace the unique gift that you are to the world.”

Responding to Wing, who asked about the future of the Church, Pope Leo told the young people they are an important part of its present. “Your voices, your ideas, your faith matter right now, and the Church needs you,” he said.

But, looking ahead, he asked them to ask themselves: “What can I offer the Church for the future? How can I



Pope Leo XIV laughs during a meeting livestreamed from the Vatican with 16,000 young people gathered at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 21. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

help others come to know Christ? How can I build peace and friendship around me?”

Smothers asked the pope if he ever finds it difficult to accept God’s mercy.

“All of us struggle with this at times,” the pope said. “The truth is that none of us is perfect.”

But, he added, it also is true that God always forgives.

“We may struggle to forgive, but God’s heart is different,” Pope Leo told the teens. “God never stops inviting us back. We experience this mercy of God in a special way in the sacrament of reconciliation; in confession, Jesus meets us through the priest. When we honestly confess our sins and accept our penance, the priest gives absolution, and we know with certainty that we are forgiven.

“Do not focus only on your sins. Look to Jesus, trust his mercy and go to him with confidence; he will always welcome you home,” the pope said to applause. †

Youths embrace Pope Leo’s call to live their lives with faith, hope and love

By John Shaughnessy and Natalie Hoefer

Seventeen-year-old Isabelle Bedel jumped to her feet and shouted with joy, joining in the thunderous roar that resounded through Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 21 when Pope Leo XIV appeared on a huge screen from the Vatican, sharing a smile and words of encouragement, advice and love for the 16,000 youths at the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC).

Moments before the pope’s appearance, Isabelle talked about the awesome feeling of him taking the time to connect with youths, to show their importance to him and the Church.

“The Catholic Church is a worldwide Church. It’s all over the place,” said Isabelle, a member of St. Susanna Parish in Plainfield. “And the pope in Rome seems so,

so far away. And the fact that he’s going to be on a call with us here in Indiana, so close to home, it’s crazy how connected the Church is. Even though it’s big, it’s connected.

“And it’s cool that us teenagers aren’t overlooked. The pope, that’s the big guy, and he’s just talking to us *for us*. It’s just so cool. We feel very looked out for and seen by such an awesome dude.”

That awesome feeling soared even more for Isabelle when the nearly hourlong digital encounter ended and she reflected on what she considered the heart of the pope’s message.

“The main point that stood out for me from Pope Leo’s talk with us is how we are important and how every single one of us is needed for the future of the Church.

“I really liked how he said at one point how the people around us have shaped our faith and kind of given us our faith. And I think that’s really important. He talked about faithful friendships and just how they refresh the soul.

“For me, I really want to be able to be that faithful friend for somebody else—because I know that’s helped other people build the Church. I want to be like what other people did for me and influence other people’s faith.”

That fire and enthusiasm filled other youths who shared the impact that Pope Leo’s conversation with five of their peers had on them.

involved,” he said. “And that includes some of the things that he talked about like going to the Sunday Mass or attending the youth activities.”

‘God is always with us’

Before the digital encounter began, 16-year-old Matthew Biehl hoped Pope Leo would touch upon the struggles that teenagers are dealing with in their daily lives.

After the encounter, Matthew voiced his appreciation that the pope focused on those struggles—and that God is with them through those challenges.

“My biggest takeaway from Pope Leo, I’d say, is that he was very eager and ready to speak with us even though he has a busy schedule and everything,” said Matthew, a member of St. Gabriel Parish in Connersville. “I feel like he really emphasized the point that the youth are the present Church, and that we need to carry that on in the future even with all the developments in the world—AI, technology, social media.

“We have to remember what we are made for, and that God is always with us through that. I’ll try to remember what he has said and really take that to prayer and take it throughout my day and every day.”

Touches of hope and history

Elise Wing was also one of the five teenagers who shared a question with Pope Leo, a moment filled with history and hope for her.

“Walking up on that stage felt like history. It really did,” said Elise, who is from the Archdiocese of Dubuque, Iowa. “And I am just so honored and blessed to.. ... I mean, the pope said our names.”

He also steered them toward what he said should be the focus of their lives.

“Everything that the Holy Father did pointed toward Jesus, how he came to us, and he said our names and made us feel known and heard. Like, that’s Jesus. That’s him acting in the image of Jesus,” Elise said. “And it’s

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Rylee Miller, left, and Isabelle Bedel of St. Susanna Parish in Plainfield, Ind., pose for a photo as Pope Leo XIV appears on a huge screen in the background at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 21 during the National Catholic Youth Conference. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

‘We’re here for a transforming experience,’ archbishop says at special NCYC Mass

By Natalie Hoefer

Youthful exuberance was already on full display in the hallways of the Indiana Convention Center on Nov. 20, the first day of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis.

Silly hats were traded. Clothespins with messages were clandestinely clipped on backpacks, and beach balls were bounced and volleyed.

But in a large meeting hall, the tone was reverent. There, more than 1,500 youths and chaperones from throughout central and southern Indiana gathered to worship at a Mass celebrated by Archbishop Charles C. Thompson.

His homily began with instructions related to this year’s NCYC theme, “I AM/*Yo Soy*.”

“Every time I say, ‘Are you ready,’ I want you to respond, ‘I am,’ ” he explained. “And when I say, ‘*Estás listo*,’ you respond, ‘*Yo soy*.’ ”

The archbishop noted there was “a lot of emotion” in the day’s readings.

“Jesus certainly did not hold back on his emotions, displaying sadness, joy, anger, frustration and so forth throughout the Gospel [Lk 19:41-44],” he said. “Jesus weeps over Jerusalem” for failing to recognize him as the Son of God.

Christ’s display of emotion “helps us to identify with him, which is an essential aspect of being able to connect with the person of Jesus in a personal, transforming experience,” the archbishop continued.

“And that’s why we’re here—for a transforming experience ... of a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus Christ.”

Such a personal encounter is at the heart of what it means to be an authentic missionary disciple, he said.

In the first reading from 1 Mc 2:15-29, the Hebrew Mattathias “stands firm in his conviction to remain faithful to the covenant relationship with the one true God,” Archbishop Thompson noted.

Cultivating a personal relationship with Jesus “through speechless prayer, words, sacrament and service” is

necessary to meet the challenges of missionary discipleship, he added.

“For that relationship, are you ready? *Estás listo?*” he asked. Responses of “I am” and “*Yo soy*” rose from the congregation.

That relationship is strengthened by the transformative effects of receiving Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

“Jesus offers himself to us in word and sacrament, especially in and through the most holy Eucharist, to nourish hearts and sustain our conviction of faith ... ,” Archbishop Thompson said.

“Each time we gather for Mass, we bring all that burdens us, all that weighs upon us, and all that stirs in our hearts, and we give it to God, who transforms all things, who meets us where we are, but calls us to grow in faith, hope, and charity

“Are you ready? *Estás listo?*” he asked “I am. *Yo soy*,” came the answer.

The archbishop called NCYC “a great spiritual occasion, much like the opportunity presented to the people of Jerusalem who failed to appreciate the divine presence before them in Jesus Christ”

In contrast, he expressed hope that Jesus would “weep with joy over NCYC, ... weep with joy that we embrace this great opportunity.”

He called on those gathered from throughout the archdiocese to “embrace that joy” and to become “people of hope, the hope that comes from not merely knowing about Jesus, but through personal encounter with him.

“Pope Leo continues to remind us to keep our eyes, our hearts, our minds fixed on [Jesus], and we shall not be disappointed.

“Are you ready? *Estás listo?*” Archbishop Thompson asked a final time.

And the people responded: “I am. *Yo soy*.”

Cailan O’Connor says she was moved by the number of youths at the Mass.

“It always just amazes, me seeing that many people all in one setting there to do the same exact thing, just there to worship the Lord,” says the member of SS. Francis and



Archbishop Charles C. Thompson and priests throughout central and southern Indiana offer the eucharistic prayer during a special Mass for archdiocesan participants at the National Catholic Youth Conference at the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 20. (Photo by Natalie Hoefer)

Clare of Assisi Parish in Greenwood.

“And it was amazing just hearing everybody get louder and singing and saying their responses as Mass went on. You could just tell everybody’s getting a little bit more confident finding their groove and then the worship music that followed after. It was just amazing.”

Jose Torres-Mitre agrees, saying he has “never in my life” worshiped at a Mass with so many people.

“Out in the media, it seems like [the number of youths in the Church is] really small,” says the member of St. Philip Neri Parish in Indianapolis. “But once you go to Mass with all these [young] Catholics, the Church is actually pretty big with the youth.”

Jose says responding “*yo soy*” during the homily resonated with him.

“I’m always ready for Jesus to talk to me and for me to talk to him.” †

Priests, NCYC participants make the sacrament of penance a priority

By Sean Gallagher

On Nov. 21, the first full day of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC), a long line of people soon formed in the large exhibit hall at the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis set aside for the sacrament of penance.

The line snaked back and forth like the line for a roller coaster at an amusement park. It soon flowed out of the room out into the hallway. Dozens of priests and bishops sat in seats spread out across the hall ready to hear confessions in English and in Spanish and give conference participants God’s mercy.

About an hour before the room opened, the 16,000 youths taking part in the conference heard Pope Leo XIV speak about the sacrament in a live video encounter they had with him in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

“We experience [the] mercy of God in a special way in the sacrament of reconciliation,” the pontiff said. “In



Father Kyle Rodden, left, is one of dozens of priests hearing confessions on Nov. 21 in an exhibit hall at the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis used for the sacrament of penance during the National Catholic Youth Conference. The priest is pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Corydon and St. Mary Parish in Lanesville. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)

confession, Jesus meets us in the priest. We honestly confess our sin and accept our penance. The priest gives absolution and we know with certainty that we are forgiven.

“So yes, it can be discouraging when we fall. But do not focus only on your sins. Look to Jesus, trust his mercy and go to him with confidence. He will always welcome you home.”

Seeing the long line of people waiting to confess their sins and the dozens of priests and bishops waiting to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with them was “eye-opening” for Paige Allgeier, 17, a member of St. Louis Parish in Batesville who was attending NCYC for the first time.

“It was so cool, all these people wanting to be forgiven and giving their time to God, and all these priests,” said Paige. “It was amazing to see everyone so happy to be here and to worship the Lord.”

She spoke with *The Criterion* about the confession room soon after taking part in the sacrament herself.

“I needed to experience the Holy Spirit with a clean soul to really get the full experience [of NCYC],” Paige said. “I have a clean soul and will be so thankful for the Lord. I’ll go through the day thankful for him and for the Holy Spirit, being here with everyone.”

A group of teenage boys from the Diocese of Peoria, Ill., also spoke with *The Criterion* about making confession a priority during NCYC.

“No matter where we are and what we do, we’re all going to be sinners,” said John Baker. “So, at the end of the day, it’s good to go to confession and know that God is there and his mercy is still within you.”

After being absolved of his sins, he felt ready for the rest of the conference.

“It’s like a clean slate,” John said. “It’s a new day and a new start. I’m looking forward to learning what I can do to grow in Christ.”

The young men spoke about how, when they see their friends trying to live out their faith well, they are encouraged to do the same. Taking part in the sacrament of reconciliation for them is an important part of that.

“When I see my friend living the Catholic faith well,

I’ll think, ‘Maybe I need to change some of the things that I’m doing,’ ” said Joshua Stedwill. “Seeing all the people going to confession makes people think, ‘I need to do that, too.’ Then we can bring that back to our high school.”

Another one of those friends was Frederic Couri. When he saw the long line of people waiting to go to confession, he doubted how personal the experience of the sacrament would be for him.

“But what I experienced in there was probably one of the more deep, personal confessions that I’ve had in a while,” he said. “It’s going to be my driving force. It’s given me the mindset that I’ll take into the different keynotes or talks. In the future, when I go to adoration or confession, I’ll focus on how I grow in my deep, personal relationship with Christ.”

Redemptorist Father Denis Sweeney has attended many NCYCs. Each time, he takes time to offer God’s mercy in the confession room. This year’s NCYC was no different for him.

“It’s an ideal moment for these young people to experience God’s love and forgiveness and not feel like they’re being hounded or judged,” Father Denis said. “They’re hungry for forgiveness. They want to be right with the Lord. They want to feel his grace and start over.”

Father Kyle Rodden, pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Corydon and St. Mary Parish in Lanesville, took his own turn in the confession room at NCYC on Nov. 21.

He was impressed by seeing so many other priests hearing confessions alongside him.

“To be a part of the brotherhood, to be a part of the bigger reality of God’s grace at work is humbling and very joyful,” said Father Rodden. “It’s a very joyful ministry to be a part of.”

He was also humbled to be a channel of God’s mercy and grace to so many people who came to him for the sacrament.

“I have to humbly pray that the Lord will provide what the person is looking for, certainly with mercy, but also with any special counsel or words of encouragement,” Father Rodden said. “It’s a great blessing to be there.” †

Relic chapel at NCYC draws teens in quiet prayer closer to the saints

By Sean Gallagher

The Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis was often filled with laughter and loud, excited talk as thousands of teens made their way back and forth through its wide hallways during the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) on Nov. 20-22.

But all that hubbub went away just a few steps off of one of those hallways in a eucharistic adoration chapel, which has been a common feature of NCYC over the years. Adjacent to it this year was a new, additional chapel—one that invited its visitors to venerate the relics of several saints.

Present there were the relics of saints connected to each of the Church’s seven sacraments: St. Francis Xavier for baptism; St. Catherine of Siena for confirmation; St. Carlo Acutis for the Eucharist; St. John Vianney for the sacrament of penance; St. Teresa of Calcutta for the anointing of the sick; SS. Joachim and Ann for marriage; and St. Alphonsus Liguori for holy orders.

All of the relics were what have traditionally been called “first-degree relics”—a part of a saint’s body.

Pauline Sister Bethany Davis helped oversee the eucharistic adoration chapel and the relic chapel at NCYC and was glad that the 16,000 youths at the conference could venerate the saints and learn more about them.

“It’s a tangible way for them to learn that a life of holiness can actually be lived in real life,” she said. “It’s a unique opportunity for them. Not a lot of parishes have a lot of relics. So, for them to have the opportunity to encounter the saints, saints they may not have heard of before, could be an important step for a person’s faith journey.”

Mason Smith of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston in West Virginia spent time praying before the relic of St. Catherine of Siena because she was his girlfriend’s confirmation saint and he had been confirmed earlier this year.

“A lot of the time, we feel that the saints are so above us, that they’re special and one-of-a-kind,” said Mason. “And they are. But we can be saints, too, through deliberate prayer and living through Christ every single day.”

Although venerating relics may have been new to many NCYC participants, it wasn’t for Hope Dierker of the Diocese of Covington, Ky. Earlier this year, she traveled to Assisi where she visited the resting place of Carlo Acutis.

“He’s a millennial saint,” said Hope. “He makes it more real for us that that can be us.”

Although only a small relic of St. Carlo was at NCYC, Hope still appreciated praying before it.

“I got the opportunity to be in the presence of his entire body,” she said. “But to be able to be in the presence of a small part of him is just as important because it was part of him and a part of his life. It’s incredible and powerful. It makes me want to be a saint.”

Hope also appreciated how the adoration chapel and the relic chapel offered an opportunity for quiet prayer amid the often loud atmosphere of NCYC.

“There’s a lot of craziness,” she said. “There is a lot of people everywhere and a lot of excitement. That’s super good. But where you really encounter the Lord personally is in silence. It’s really important to hear his voice. Sometimes, it’s just a whisper. And you need to be able to have silence to hear that.”

Sister Bethany said the quiet that the chapels offered was an important aspect of them, especially for the teenagers attending NCYC.

“There aren’t a lot of opportunities for silence in our lives today, especially in the life of a young person, whether that’s of their own making or just the noise of the world today,” Sister Bethany said. “So, I think it’s important for them to know that they can be alone.

“A lot of times, people aren’t afraid to pray. And maybe they’re not even afraid of God. But they’re afraid of what might be said in the silence, or they’re afraid to be alone with themselves. So, to provide them with an opportunity for them to know that it’s OK, that Jesus is there and there are people like them [in the saints] all around is a really beautiful opportunity.”

This was a message that Pope Leo XIV shared with



National Catholic Youth Conference participants pray before a relic of St. Teresa of Calcutta on Nov. 21 in a room of the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis used as a relic chapel at the event. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)

the 16,000 youths at NCYC on Nov. 21 during a live video encounter that took place at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

“To entrust our struggles to Jesus, we have to spend time with him in prayer,” he said. “We have to have a relationship with him. In quiet, we can speak honestly about what is in our hearts. During eucharistic adoration, you can look at Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and you know that he looks at you, and he looks at you with love. He often speaks to us gently in the stillness.

“That is why daily moments of silence are so important, whether through adoration, reading Scripture, talking to him, looking for those little spaces of time where we can be with him. Little by little, we learn to hear his voice, to feel his presence, both within and through the people that he sends to us.

“... Remember also Mary, the mother of Jesus, and our mother. She understands what we go through and she prays for us. There’s a powerful way to ask for her help, and that’s praying the rosary, through her intercession.

“And with all the saints praying for us, we can confidently place everything in God’s hands, knowing that he always hears us, he’s always with us.” †

EMBRACE

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beautiful to see somebody so holy really coming to us like Jesus would, like Jesus does.

“In the very end, he was like, ‘I see hope in this generation.’ And that was something that really hit me.”

‘One-to-one with God’

Listening to Pope Leo, Gabriel Gonzalez realized he needs to focus his life more on his faith and his relationship with God.

“One of the biggest takeaways from Pope Leo’s message is that he talked about prayer and adoration,” said Gabriel, a member of Our Lady of the Greenwood Parish in Greenwood. “Looking back, I feel like I need to do more in my day-to-day spiritual life.

“I feel I’ve ignored that part of my spiritual life. Moving forward, I’m going to start praying more in-depth and doing more Scripture analysis. That really helps in

your prayer life. And I think I might go to adoration more because that’s a one-to-one with God.”

‘A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity’

In anticipation of Pope Leo’s appearance, 16-year-old Lillie Bischoff viewed the digital encounter as “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see him this early in my life.”

When the encounter ended, Lillie embraced the opportunity she has to make a difference in people’s lives.

“The one thing that really stood out to me was how much Pope Leo encouraged us to not be afraid to live our lives and try to do God’s will, especially if it’s a vocation called to religious life, sacramental married life or priesthood,” said Lillie, a member of St. Gabriel Parish in Connersville.

“One way that I can apply this to my life is to help others know and encourage them to listen to God’s will. Whether that’s in using silent prayer, like adoration, or just talking it out with them—to hopefully get them to do God’s will, so we can all reach heaven.”

A call to share the faith with the world’

As she listened to Pope Leo share his encouragement, advice and love with all the youths at the National Catholic Youth Conference, Rylee Miller thought of all her peers who didn’t have the opportunity to hear him, and who don’t have faith as a foundation in their lives.

She focused on how Pope Leo called youths to bring others to the Church.

“I feel that’s really important because some people get lost and don’t really go to church much or help out a lot,” said Rylee, 16, a member of St. Susanna Parish in Plainfield.

“I know at our church, we really do a lot with the little kids, and I think that’s really inspiring that he’s calling us to come to our Church and just to devote some of our time and some of our knowledge and share it with the world.”

A plan for the present and the future

Marley Wyatt described “getting to be in the presence of the Holy Father” as “a massive honor.”

He hopes to make the most of that experience by

trying to understand and honor the plan that he believes God has for his life.

“One thing I took away is that we’re not here by accident. God has a plan for us,” said Marley, 16, a member of St. Rita Parish in Indianapolis. “Of course, he has a plan for everything. But he also has a plan simply for us. He loves us. He wants us to do his will. And so, we must. Always.

“In my mind, I will do what he wants me to do. My thoughts don’t matter. The finite will bow before the infinite. That is all. I will surrender myself before God. I will perform his will more than mine.”

‘You always have God to rely on’

In case one of the five youths who asked Pope Leo a question hadn’t been available, Nate Hollinden was an alternate for that role. And even though that didn’t happen, just being part of the experience of seeing and hearing Pope Leo is an experience he will treasure.

“All the people I’ve got to work with, it’s really been an honor to get to be with them,” said Nate, 15, a member of St. Paul Parish in Tell City. “It’s been amazing.”

It’s been life-changing, too—a feeling many youths had after the digital encounter with Pope Leo.

“I really took out that you’ll always have God,” Nate said. “You’ll always have Jesus to fall back on even if you feel like everyone is not liking you, everyone is ignoring you. You always have God to rely on.

“You should try to never lose that focus. You should always stay positive and stay where you need to be in your faith. I’m going to try to show other people that if I can live my life in faith, and that I can stay positive, then hopefully that can get them to do the same thing.” †



Gabriel Gonzalez of Our Lady of the Greenwood Parish in Greenwood, left, shares a photo with Matthew Biehl and Lillie Bischoff, both of St. Gabriel Parish in Connersville, after Pope Leo XIV shared a digital encounter with 16,000 youths at the National Catholic Youth Conference on Nov. 21. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

Terre Haute teens ‘expecting the best’ at NCYC find it ‘way more’ than expected

By Natalie Hoefer

It’s about 12:30 p.m. on Nov. 20, and youths from around the country are starting to arrive at the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis for the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC).

Among them are three members from three Terre Haute parishes—plus one’s cousin from Indianapolis.

As the four youths sit down to speak with *The Criterion*, their eyes are bright with excitement as they anticipate all the three-day event will bring.

This article captures the pre-NCYC expectations and post-conference takeaways of the Terre Haute teens: Sofia Medina of St. Margaret Mary Parish, Sophia Conner of St. Patrick Parish and Carmella Marrero of St. Benedict Parish.

Joining the group is Medina’s cousin, Lily Morales of St. Luke the Evangelist Parish in Indianapolis. She attended NCYC as part of the Terre Haute group.

‘Expecting the best’

This NCYC marks the second for Medina, who attended the conference in Indianapolis in 2023.

“I liked it last [time] because I got to meet new people, especially from different places and different communities,” the high school senior says on the opening day of this year’s event. “So, I’m hoping to be able to do the same this year.”

She says she is “just excited for everything,” but especially the live digital session with Pope Leo XIV.

So is Sophia, her fellow senior.

“Just to see him live [on screen] and hear his voice, I think that’s going to be so amazing,” she says.

But, as a first-timer at NCYC, Sophia is also looking forward “to just everything.”

“My sister went, and she just said it was just magical,” she says. “So, I’m just expecting the best.”

Carmella was a freshman the first time she attended NCYC. This time, the junior says she is approaching the experience more philosophically, looking forward to “learning more stuff about myself and my own faith and just getting to experience more thoughtful stuff.”

Lily, the youngest of the four teens, was excited to share her first NCYC with her cousin.

“I’m a freshman, so I want to start high school by just growing in my faith in the best ways possible and connecting with others,” she says.

As the four youths head off to join into the growing crowd in the convention center, they don white, fur-trimmed cowboy hats with black spots—part of the “silly hat” culture of NCYC.

‘Way more than I expected’

Two days have passed, and it’s now 12:30 p.m. on Nov. 22. There are still 10 hours left of NCYC,



Carmella Marrero, left, Sofia Medina, Lily Morales and Sophia Conner, members of a group from the Terre Haute Deanery, pose on Nov. 20 before an archdiocesan Mass in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis during the National Catholic Youth Conference. (Photos by Natalie Hoefer)

including the closing Mass in Lucas Oil Stadium.

But much has happened in the last 48 hours. Four general sessions for the 16,000 participants have taken place in the stadium, including adoration and the pope’s live, on-screen interaction and more.

As they gather to share about their NCYC experience, none of the four from the Terre Haute group has the cowboy hats they started with.

“I think Lily traded, like, 30 hats,” Sophia says with amusement. “And I got to arm wrestle a friar! I won, but I think he let me win.”

The senior turns more serious as she reflects on the spiritual side of her first NCYC experience.

“It exceeded my expectations,” Sophia gushes.

“There’s just, like, something in the air here, and it’s amazing. It’s not like anything else I’ve ever experienced. It helps a lot to know that I’m surrounded by people who aren’t perfect but are trying their best and still showed up for their faith.”

The digital session with Pope Leo was a highlight for Sophia, who says he “said everything I felt like I need to hear.”

Adoration in Lucas Oil Stadium was another highlight for several of the girls, including Medina.

“Everything hit me all at once,” she says. “Everything just felt so real in the moment. It’s so hard to explain.”

One takeaway for her is the assurance that God is “always with me, no matter what,” Medina says. “And he’s never going to leave us, even if we’ve done something wrong. And he’s always healing us, no matter what.”

Her cousin Lily was also moved by the adoration experience.

“Being in the presence of Christ with everybody there, you could feel it in the air, just everybody being brought together by God, being thankful for him and everything that he’s ever done for us,” she says. “Just being in the moment was amazing.”

Despite her cousin sharing in advance about what to expect, Lily says her first NCYC experience was “way more than I expected.” She appreciates “being able to hear people talk about their experiences, ... what they’ve gone through and how God has changed their life.”

NCYC impacted her own life, says Lily. She is walking away with an “understanding that a lot of people have their own problems, but we can all together, like, collectively, just bring it to God, and we can literally feel better in seconds if we just talk to him, if we really try to feel connected to him.”

Carmella gained insights, too, but of a more personal nature.

“I personally learned a lot more understanding of letting God have his own plans instead of trying to take things into my own control,” she says. “I realized I just need to put things into his hands more and trust, [and not] get aggravated and wonder why nothing is happening, ... to believe in him because he will do what’s best for me.”

Going to confession was a highlight for Carmella. Not only did she feel “lighter,” but she gained understanding “that when I do a sin, it’s wrong and I shouldn’t be doing it, instead of choosing to do it and be like, ‘Oh, I can just go confession.’ I should just know that I shouldn’t be doing it. But to also know that, even if I do slip into it, confession is always there.”

‘I AM ... ’

The NCYC theme, “I AM/Yo Soy” in English and Spanish, was explored in different ways throughout the three days.

So, as the three-day event draws to an end, *The Criterion* asks the four teens from the Terre Haute group to complete the phrase “I AM”

Sophia: “I AM ready. I’m ready to embrace my faith. I want to make it a priority to share with my family everything that I learned here and share with my friends at school I want to share it with everyone.”

Medina: “I AM excited. I’m excited to learn more about my faith. And I want to pray the rosary or a small prayer every once in a while throughout my week, my day and, like, anytime—it’s just the easiest thing you could do.”

Lily: “I AM confident. I’m pretty confident in my faith now. I’m confident about how much I love Christ and how I can, like, bring it out into the world, to show people how powerful he is, how powerful his love is. ... Instead of, like, scrolling on TikTok or something, I want to just take time out of my day to thank God for everything of the day, for the gift of life.”

Carmella: “I AM open. I am open to all that God wants to give me and to not close myself off because I feel like I don’t want to do [what God is asking] or like I’m not into what it is [he wants me to do]. I want to try and be more open to the stuff in front of me and not be stuck on stuff behind me.”

Sophia’s summary of her NCYC experience is a hoped-for outcome for all participants: “I really have felt the Holy Spirit inside of me here.” †



Carmella Marrero of St. Benedict Parish in Terre Haute poses with a sweatshirt she purchased—and a taco hat she traded her cowboy hat for—in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 22 during the National Catholic Youth Conference.

Adoration with 16,000 Catholics felt ‘like you were a part of something bigger’

By Natalie Hoefer

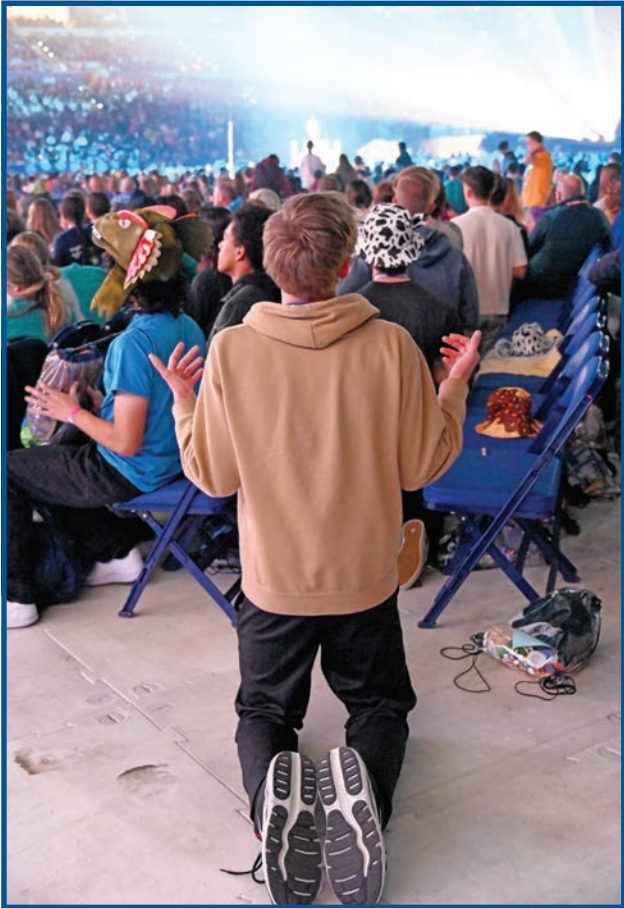
One of the most impactful experiences of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) held every other year in Indianapolis is the gathering of all participants in Lucas Oil Stadium for eucharistic adoration, which took place this year on Nov. 21.

“This evening is about healing,” said Gian Gamboa, one of this year’s NCYC emcees. “You can’t give until you are healed from within.”

Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Sister Miriam James Heidland spoke about healing before the Blessed Sacrament was reverently processed into the stadium in a monstrance.

She defined healing as “an ongoing encounter with God’s love and truth that brings us into wholeness and communion.”

“We have lots of secrets, don’t we?” Sister Miriam James asked. “And secrets just make us very ill. And so,



A youth kneels in worship facing toward the Blessed Sacrament in a monstrance on an altar in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 21 during the National Catholic Youth Conference.

what Jesus does is he comes into your life in an encounter with love and truth—the love heals the wounds, the truth heals the lies.”

This encounter occurs in “a place where God dwells within you,” she continued. “It’s a place where your dignity cannot be destroyed, and the gift of who you are cannot be hidden.

“And it’s from this place, my dear friends, that the Lord speaks to us.”

During adoration, as U.S. Military Services Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio knelt before Christ in the Blessed Sacrament in the center of the stadium, he read the Bread of Life Discourse from John 6:35-58.

“We must partake of the bread of eternal life if we hope to achieve our goal—eternal happiness in union with Almighty God,” he said. “Jesus insists twice on this necessity, even in the faith of the disbelief of his audience. He will not compromise to please the crowd. ...

“Unlike many who will only tell us what they think we want to hear, Christ’s words are spirit and life. They challenge us to grow. They invite us into communion with him and with each other.”

Mark MacDonald has spent time in adoration before, but never with more than 16,000 people, he said.

“When I’ve been [to adoration], it’s been, like, super quiet and like it’s just you there,” said the member of St. Patrick Parish in Terre Haute. But with the worship music during the holy time at Lucas Oil Stadium, “it felt really different,” said the teen.

“It was peaceful, and I felt like [Christ] was really close at that time for me.”

Emma Timberlake agreed.

The member of SS. Francis and Clare of Assisi Parish in Greenwood said that “some people have trouble focusing in adoration,” but that music can help.

“The music [during adoration at NCYC] this time was



Father Liam Hosty, left, U.S. Military Services Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio and seminarian Lucas LaRosa kneel in adoration before Christ in the Blessed Sacrament in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on Nov. 21 during the National Catholic Youth Conference. (Photos by Natalie Hoefer)

really pretty, and they had the lyrics up [on large screens], so everyone was able to sing along.”

The experience was “really special” for Ella Weinschrott of Our Lady of Grace Parish in Noblesville, Ind., in the Diocese of Lafayette. “It really impacted me prayerfully.”

She and her group were already near the altar where the monstrance was placed for adoration.

“So, I was kind of moved by how, like, all of a sudden people started rushing toward the altar, trying to get as close as they could to Jesus.”

Ella said it was “nice to be surrounded by like people that were so passionate about [the Eucharist]. It made you feel like you were a part of something bigger.” †

Parent just wanting ‘to see what NCYC is like’ now ‘would love to come back’

By Natalie Hoefer

When Bridget Ireland of St. Joseph University Parish in Terre Haute signed up to be a chaperone for a group from that city attending the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis, she did so for practical purposes.



Bridget Ireland, left, and Doug Elia pose with Jordan Schaulberg, second from right, and Breanna Southard, two members of a group from Terre Haute they chaperoned at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 20-22. (Submitted photo)

“I’m here with my oldest son,” she explains on Nov. 20, the first day of the three-day event. “It’s his first experience here, and I just tagged along to help out.”

It was Ireland’s first time, too.

“I’ve been on lots of retreats, so I imagine this will be a similar experience,” she says.

She noticed “lots of good options” among the adult breakout sessions when she reviewed the schedule and hopes to take in a few of them.

“But mostly I’m looking forward to seeing how the kids experience it,” says Ireland. “Especially in terms of the number of Catholics here, which is so much bigger than their parish [youth] group or the [Terre Haute Deanery] Teen Connections.”

By Nov. 22, the last day of NCYC, Ireland has clearly moved from passive observer to enthusiastic supporter.

“It’s been wonderful!” she says, more animated than on day one. “So many people, just so many—when we’re in big sessions together, the energy is incredible.”

As she got to know the teens in the group, her admiration of them grew.

“They’re really sweet,” says Ireland. “And they all are just embracing all of the activities we’re going to, all of the things we’re participating in. And they are participating fully. They have lots of energy in there, and they’re attentive—it’s great.”

She benefited from the experience, too, saying it “really was just so impactful on me, personally.”

“Sitting among 16,000 Catholics and listening to the pope talk to us was very powerful. And having the opportunity to go to confession is always nice.”

Ireland gained practical knowledge, too.

During the conference, she noted how one of the emcees would “bring her energy and a game to the beginning of each of the sessions.” As a new religious education teacher for the third- and fourth-graders of her parish, she plans to now do the same.

“I thought this would be a good experience for me to see what NCYC is like and be able to take that information back to my husband and my other kids,” Ireland reflects. “And now I’m very excited to do that.”

“I want my other children to hear ... how amazing it was and all of these opportunities to be around other young people, fellow Catholics.”

Ireland doesn’t just want to send her younger children to NCYC in the future, she says: “I would love to come back, too!” †

Youth shares a soulful, vulnerable thank-you based on an unlikely set of principles

By John Shaughnessy

Getting ready to speak before more than 16,000 people in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, 18-year-old Nolan McCracken admitted he was “very nervous” and “humbled” to share what was essentially a soulful, vulnerable and unusual thank-you at the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) on Nov. 20.

Yet as he shared his journey of faith with his fellow teenagers from across the country, the senior at Cathedral High School in Indianapolis displayed a steady confidence in thanking God, his mother, his sister, his grandmother and his friends—a thank-you that he tied to the three laws of motion of Sir Isaac Newton, a 17th-century mathematician and physicist.

“My journey with God so far can be understood by using Newton’s three laws of motion,” Nolan told the audience. “Newton’s first law explains that an object at rest will remain at rest unless acted upon by an external force. And during middle school and my freshman year of high school, I was most certainly an object at rest—not physically or mentally, but spiritually. I had this desire to be great. However, I wanted to be great for my own sake; to be ranked number one in GPA [grade point average], to be in the most extracurriculars.

“This required taking time away from religion. I mean, how exactly would God improve my grades or increase my odds of success? My mom and sister went to church every Sunday. And every Sunday when mom asked if I wanted to go, I said no, that I had important work to do. At the same time, my grandma challenged me—to get me to accept or even recognize a perspective other than my own. She attempted to be that external force I needed most. Yet I rejected it, confident in my own ability and pride.”

Then he made a switch to Cathedral High School for his sophomore year “to further develop my academics”—a change that also gradually and dramatically impacted his relationship with God.

“Newton’s second law dictates ‘force equals mass times acceleration.’” Nolan continued. “In this new school, I attempted to increase my success—my acceleration—by letting go of what I thought was holding me back: friends, family and a relationship with a God whose face I no longer recognized. But in this new environment, I found faces that mirrored God’s own. There were lives grounded in something, or rather *someone*, other than themselves.”

‘I began to see that I could rely on God’

Nolan also told his peers he was touched and influenced by watching *The Case for Christ* in a religion class, a film that captures the faith path of investigative journalist Lee Strobel—“the true story of a man whose wife finds Jesus while he remains confident in his atheism.”

“He decides that he would prove that Christ never existed,” Nolan noted. “However, through all of this

investigation and doubt, he discovers the truth and beauty of Christ. Like this man, I began to see the truth and beauty of Christ as reflected in my family and friends. And seeing the power God could have, how he could be an infinite force where mass no longer mattered, I began to accept him.

“I began to attend church with my mom and sister and began to understand where my grandma was coming from. In every all-school Mass, I was able to see the unity of the Mass, of the people, of everything. By participating, I could be a part of a community, a part of a collective witness to love, drawing me in further. However, I was still unsure. Unsure if I could ever accept this external force fully.”

Nolan shared that his full acceptance came during a junior retreat that Cathedral held at the University of Notre Dame in northern Indiana.

“I got to know people whom I had never spoken to nor accepted, thinking myself superior to them,” he recalled. “But when I became open to hearing about the external force God had in their lives, I began to see that I could rely on God—to see that accepting his love wasn’t weakness, it was strength.

“That night, we visited the Grotto, and I lit a candle, humbly asking for God’s external force in my life, knowing that the emotions of a tear-filled happiness and a full, heavy heart were the only signs I needed.”

In his acceptance of “God’s loving and powerful external force,” Nolan saw Newton’s third law of motion come into play in his life.

A life-changing revelation

“Newton’s third law explains that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction,” he told his fellow teenagers.

“This internal force that I had attempted to maximize was meaningless because the sum of all internal forces is always zero. Now in a beautiful community, I received the most meaningful external force: God, revealed in the hearts of those around me.

“When I was most inert, an object at rest, living each day blind to God’s presence, he remained. He remained in the people that loved me, despite my stubbornness



Nolan McCracken shares a moment of joy with his mother Becca and sister Ruby—two of the people that Nolan, in his talk before 16,000 people at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 20, credited with bringing him closer to God. (Submitted photo)

and pride. He remained in my grandma, my religion teacher and my friends. Innumerable people were there for me, acting as extensions of God’s external force. All I needed was to close my eyes and know that I was held.”

That revelation has led him to join the youth group at St. Simon the Apostle Parish in Indianapolis and to take part in the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults program to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church at Easter next year.

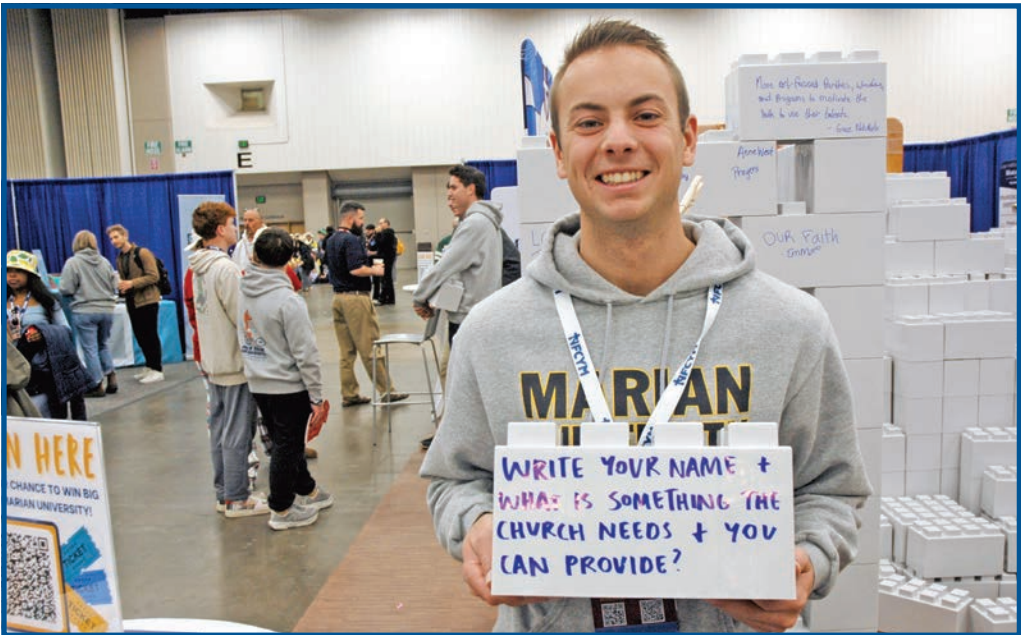
His journey of faith also led him to take part in the Preach All Ways Initiative at Marian University in Indianapolis, a program designed to help youths and lay adults share their journeys of faith with others, which led him to be chosen to speak at NCYC.

Nolan shared one last message with his fellow teenagers at NCYC, a message he hopes they’ll set in motion in their lives. It’s also a reminder for people of all ages.

“No matter how much or how little you recognize God’s presence in your life, he remains. There. In the background. Waiting for you. No matter how many times you feel that you abandoned God, he remains—the unmovable force fixed on you and happy to welcome you home.

“If you feel you are an object at rest or even moving in the wrong direction, Jesus is there for you. I invite you to accept him, to close your eyes and know that you are held.” †

Youths hope to leave their mark on the Church with their contributions



Aaron Bauman, a senior in the San Damiano Scholars program at Marian University in Indianapolis, shows the giant, plastic building block that features an intriguing question for youths at the interactive exhibit hall of the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 20. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

By John Shaughnessy

One of the challenges to the young people at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 20-22 involved giant, plastic, building blocks, and this intriguing question:

What does the Church need and you can provide?

After considering the question, many of the youths took a royal blue marker and began writing their answer on a large, gray building block—taking up the invitation that Marian University in Indianapolis offered the youths in their area inside the interactive exhibit hall of the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis.

Once they finished their answers, the youths added their blocks to an ever-growing structure.

Here are some of the answers the youths gave, hoping to leave their mark in more ways than one:

“Spreading God’s love through joy.”

“Community. We can provide this by showing up for one another and helping those in need with the resources we have.”

“Making everyone feel welcome.”

“Service to the poor.”

“I can provide more prayers.”

“Kindness and remembering not to judge.”

“The Church needs people who care.”

“Activities to help children learn better in Mass.”

“I can provide positivity.”

“More art-focused parishes, windows and programs to motivate the youth to share their talents.”

“I can bring my friends to church.”

“Love and charity. Outreach.”

“The Church needs more people to share their time, treasure and talents to spread the Good News.”

“I can provide love and my presence.”

What would you add to this list? †

Youth leaders share their hearts and faith with teens at NCYC and grow in both

By John Shaughnessy

Some people will question the sanity of an adult who willingly agrees to be a leader for three days or more for a group of teenagers at a national conference of 16,000 youths.

Katie Tipker even added to the degree of difficulty for that assignment by choosing to bring her 8-month-old son George to the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis on Nov. 20-22—the conference where she led 18 youths from St. John Paul II Parish in Sellersburg.

Yet instead of viewing it all as a challenge, Tipker flashed a beautiful smile when she shared how she considers the NCYC experience as an opportunity and a blessing to help lead the youths deeper into their Catholic faith and closer in their relationship with Christ.

“I like seeing the excitement they have for the Lord, and the passion that they come back to the parish with,” said Tipker, who was assisted by four chaperones, including her husband, George. “Even the kids who I think, ‘Man, they didn’t get anything out of it,’ months later I hear stories of how it impacted them and totally changed their faith journey.”



While leading 18 youths from St. John Paul II Parish in Sellersburg at the National Catholic Youth Conference on Nov. 20-22, Katie Tipker also brought her 8-month-old son George with her.



Youths and adult leaders of the group from Holy Name of Jesus Parish in Beech Grove, Ind., show their joy and their floppy, cow-inspired headgear that marked participants from the Archdiocese of Indianapolis during the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 20-22.

Sharing the conference with the youths also has a powerful impact on her faith.

“It reignites my faith,” said Tipker, the parish’s director of communications. “I was born and raised Catholic. I don’t have that ‘wow’ moment that some people have. For me, seeing them having powerful moments with Christ, those are my powerful moments. It makes me go back to my work reinvigorated. It makes me be lit on fire again in my faith journey. I really get to see God’s presence at work in everyday life.”

Cara Lipinski shares that feeling.

During this year’s NCYC—her seventh—the youth minister at Divine Mercy Parish in Massillon, Ohio, in the Diocese of Youngstown, helped to lead 27 youths.

“I continue to see and hear teenagers who tell me their lives have changed here, and this is a pivotal moment in their faith journey,” Lipinski said. “For me, that’s super important to continue offering them the opportunity to be here.

“Typically, the key moments here for them are adoration and Mass. Those are the big moments for them to see how many people are sharing with them in their faith. To hear them say how their life has been changed is pretty convincing.”

NCYC also has an impact on her faith.

“It’s a boost for my journey as well, to know that something we’re doing is making a difference,” she said. “But it’s also a good time for us as youth ministers to get

away and reflect on our journey and take some time for ourselves in prayer, away from home and with our kids.”

For Gregory Gust, this year’s NCYC was his first. The assistant director for faith formation for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston in West Virginia helped to lead 98 youths.

“I hope this helps them to draw closer to Christ,” he said. “To gain an understanding that the Church is relevant and very much alive today, that it’s accessible for young people. I hope they’ll be ignited by the Holy Spirit and go forth and make disciples. Getting to see young people thriving and living genuine and authentic Catholic lives, that brings me so much joy.”

Cuquis Romero shares



Youths and adult leaders of the group from St. Rita Parish in Indianapolis get ready to join in the fun and the faith of 16,000 youths coming together at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 20-22. (Photos by John Shaughnessy)

one special quality of NCYC for her as a youth leader.

“I can feel God’s presence at every NCYC,” said Romero, who led 39 youths there as the director of young adult ministry at St. Patrick Parish in Indianapolis.



Cuquis Romero

“For me, NCYC is the biggest national event for the Catholic youth. And it’s the best. I love this,” said Romero, who was experiencing her seventh NCYC. “I can see the faith of the teenagers and how they want to be part of this. I can see the light on their faces. And they pray, especially during adoration time. They share with me their faith, their goodness. I

give my faith to them, too.”

Youth leaders at NCYC also give their hearts, their patience and their guidance to the youths in their groups. And even their moments of exasperation and near-exhaustion are offered up to God, for the sake of the teenagers.

“I love to see how the kids react when they see the big Church and the fact there’s so many other young Catholics just like them,” said Beth Pifer, coordinator of religious



Beth Pifer

education and youth ministry at St. Ambrose Parish in Seymour. “I think adoration is the best part—and the closing Mass. I love to see everybody together and praying together. I’ve seen a lot of impact.”

One of her favorite moments from her four times of leading a group at NCYC came months later when a youth was preparing to receive the sacrament of confirmation. In a letter to Indianapolis Archbishop Charles C. Thompson, the youth shared how he “felt the presence of Jesus during adoration” at NCYC—and how that feeling had stayed with him ever since.

“That makes me happy,” Pifer said.

So does the entire NCYC experience.

“It’s wonderful,” she said. “It’s beautiful to see so many young, devoted Catholic youths.

“They’re the future.” †

Youths at NCYC see joy in a broad array of religious attending the conference

By Sean Gallagher

When Alana Brooks-Murphy became an aspirant for the Salesian Sisters in August, she was ready to go on whatever adventure God put before her.

She just didn’t expect that one of those adventures would be to sit atop a dunk tank, ready to be sent in an instant into a tank of plastic balls by a good throw from a Catholic teenager.

But that’s what she did on Nov. 20 at the booth of her religious community in an exhibit hall of the Indiana

Convention Center in Indianapolis on the opening day of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC).

“Even when it’s difficult, it’s for the best,” said Brooks-Murphy with a smile as she reflected on following God’s lead in religious life. “Because I know that, no matter where he takes me, it is exactly the best place for me to be.”

When she was a child and then a teenager, Brooks-Murphy, 24, didn’t have any experience of people in religious life. She also knows that many of the 16,000 teenagers who came to NCYC are in the same boat.

“Being able to be that witness to them is just a beautiful thing, no matter what they’re discerning, no matter what they’re called to,” she said. “I’m just being here as another person who can say that this is a good life.”

Brooke Vollertsen, a teenager from Helena, Mont., at NCYC was glad to see representatives from so many religious communities at the conference.

“We literally don’t see them at all on a daily basis,” she said. “So, it’s interesting just to meet them and see

See RELIGIOUS, page 11B

Activities at NCYC help youths ‘think about the different sacraments’

By Natalie Hoefer

In an exhibit hall of the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis, a teen knots strips at the bottom of an old T-shirt to make a reusable bag.

Another makes a rosary. A group of teens test their knowledge of the faith in a trivia game.

These activities and more are part of an effort to help youths understand different aspects of this year’s National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) theme—“I Am/Yo Soy” in English and Spanish.

“Every year at NCYC we have about six to eight kind of ‘spirit stations’ where we do interactive activities with young people,” says Aaron Frazita, director of interactive exhibit.

“This year, what we did was to take the I Am statements that are associated with different sacraments and came up with activities, crafts and experiences for the young people to kind of think about and work through the different sacraments.”

So, the sacrament of baptism becomes “*I am* chosen.”

“They did a lot with water, and how that element of water not only happens through baptism, but then we see water, and it’s a reminder of that baptismal call each and every day,” Frazita explains.

Each NCYC includes a service component. This year that area of the interactive event hall represented the sacrament of the Eucharist, with the message “I am transformed.” (See related article on page 12B.)

“The entrance to that area is actually set up like a chapel,” Frazita says. “The idea is that ... it’s not enough for us just to sit in church, but to be transformed by the Eucharist and then to go into the world and serve.”

For part of this year’s service area, participants were asked to bring old T-shirts to create bags to send medical supplies to Guatemala.

“It’s really doesn’t take much to give a small amount of your time to help such a big cause and trying to help those that are less fortunate than us,” says Justin Momanchola-Molo of the Diocese of Knoxville, Tenn., as he ties knots out of strips cut into the bottom of a T-shirt. “And helping others just really feels good, you know?”

The sacrament of confirmation inspired the “*I am* anointed” area.

“They took the gifts of the Holy Spirit and really break those apart a little bit,” Frazita says. “For each one of those [gifts], there is an activity or a game that goes along with it”—like making rosaries as an action for

“piety,” playing a faith-based trivia game for “wisdom” and doing push-ups or sit-ups for “fortitude.”

In the “*I am* called” section, the sacraments of marriage and holy orders—as well as the call to religious or single life—are explored. Vestments, habits and wedding clothes are on display so youths “can visually sort of ‘try on’ those vocations,” says Frazita.

The sacraments of reconciliation and anointing of the sick are combined in the “*I am* healed” area.

“With anointing of the sick,” he says, “the message is it’s not just about death but that we all need that anointing right within our lives.”

Sheets with an examination of conscience were available. Volunteers encourage youths visiting the area to receive the sacrament of reconciliation offered during NCYC and invite them to lift with their s shoulders a thick, hanging beam like Christ bore when he died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins.

Libby Berg of St. Pius X Parish in Indianapolis gave the activity a try.



Libby Berg of St. Pius X Parish in Indianapolis, top, enjoys an activity in an area of the interactive exhibit hall in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis on Nov. 22 during the National Catholic Youth Conference. (Photo by Natalie Hoefer)

“So, you’re not just playing Gaga [ball] ... but then you’re also just kind of talking about where they are in their faith lives and how they can journey with hopefully their youth leader or their pastor a little better.”

But just having fun with the games is OK, too, says Benedictine Sister Teresa Gunter of Monastery Immaculate Conception in Ferdinand, Ind., in the Evansville Diocese. She served on the interactive event hall team.

“Sometimes we think that our faith always has to be so serious,” she says. “But really, we are called to be joyful Christians who love God.” †

Times of ‘failure’ and anxiety can lead to God’s call for our lives, youths tell peers

By John Shaughnessy

Like a growing number of teenagers, Felicity Britt and Mary Cing struggle with anxiety and a fear of failure.

At the same time, they were brave enough to share their struggles and fear with thousands of their peers at the National Catholic Youth Conference.

As they opened their hearts during the talks they gave at the conference, they also offered a path to a closer relationship with Christ through their humility, their hope and even their touches of humor.

“Like a lot of teens, I find myself struggling with anxiety, and trying to figure out what I am doing,” Felicity began her talk at the conference on Nov. 21. “Like a lot of Catholics, I’m trying to find my vocation and search for God’s call in my life.”

A member of St. Roch Parish in Indianapolis who is a homeschooled, high school junior, Felicity thought she had found her answers in a creative way. She started to design, create and sell faith-inspired sweatshirts, with plans of donating the proceeds to a shelter for women and children.

“If I can’t make a huge difference in the world, the least I can do is make a small difference for a few people who need it,” the 17-year-old told her peers. “That kinda helps you get over the anxiety. Helping others, serving others—that’s part of how Jesus is working through our lives.”

“The only problem is, I didn’t sell a single one! And anyone who’s had a failure like that knows it’s extremely disheartening for something you poured your heart and soul into to crash like that. And not even crash, but to never even get it off the ground.”



Felicity Britt

Still, she continues to make sweatshirts.

“Why? Because I want people to know it’s our effort that matters. It doesn’t matter if it doesn’t have immediate success. There’s still an effort behind it to love and serve.”

She felt the force of another so-called “failure” when a friend drifted away from the Church. Felicity thought she could have done more for her friend, but her choir director told her, “It’s in God’s hands. The best thing you can do is live a life so full of God’s love that it becomes a light for her and others.”

That’s what she tries to do, Felicity told the audience, even as she’s still sometimes full of anxiety.

“Selling sweatshirts—or trying to sell sweatshirts—is a small thing. But it’s done with big effort. And with an even bigger desire to share what I have learned about love and Jesus and discipleship. There are so many people in the world doing small things for the Lord but with big effort. Imagine if we all did that?”

In closing, she said, “I’m scared! I still don’t know what my vocation is or how exactly I’m supposed to be loving and serving others. But I am called. We all are. Called to give what we have, even if that’s just a pocketful of anxiety and a couple of unsold sweatshirts.”

‘It didn’t go as I hoped’

Felicity developed her talk—and the confidence to share it—through the Preach All Ways Initiative at Marian University in Indianapolis, a program designed to help youths and lay adults share their journeys of faith with others.

Sixteen-year-old Mary Cing also participated in the program, leading to the story she shared at NCYC on Nov. 22—a story also touched by doubt and failure.

“Last summer, I participated in a week-long summer

program at Marian University called the Missionary Disciples Institute (MDI) that included daily faith activities and new encounters with other young Catholics,” said Mary, a member of St. Mark the Evangelist Parish in Indianapolis and a student at Providence Cristo Rey High School in Indianapolis.

“After MDI, I had big plans on what my journey of discipleship would look like, but it didn’t go as I hoped, and I never actually got to carry out my planned way of serving others.”

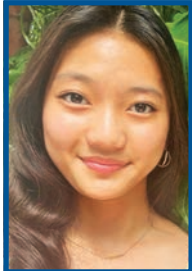
Living that experience, Mary told her peers that she felt like St. Peter when he “asked if Jesus was really going to wash his feet.”

“Peter thought discipleship would look like one thing, but Jesus surprised him with a call to perfect humility,” Mary told the audience. “This is the mysterious and challenging thing about the way God works. We are always fed and sent out by God in the Eucharist, but our next step after that is not to focus on the benefit behind the missionary work we perform, but instead, to give space for God’s calling to grow in our hearts.”

She said we also have to realize that God “knows what we’re meant to do and when we’re meant to do it.

“And he often calls in perfectly unexpected ways,” she continued. “The greatest way to answer God’s call is to let him fill you with his love in the sacraments, so that you can receive his clarity in the moments when you would least expect him working in your life.

“We may not know right now what God is calling us to *do*, but we do know what God is calling us to *be*, and that is a disciple who is perfectly open to him.” †



Mary Cing

NCYC plays a vital role in forming future priests of the archdiocese

By Sean Gallagher

The Archdiocese of Indianapolis has made a name for itself in the Church in the U.S. It hosts more large national Catholic events than any other diocese in the country.

The National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) has been held in the archdiocese every two years since 2011. The Fellowship of Catholic University Students’ annual SEEK conference was held in Indianapolis in 2019, drawing some 17,000 Catholic young adults to the city. And more than 50,000 people gathered here in 2024 for the National Eucharistic Congress.

Father Eric Augenstein, archdiocesan director of seminarians, says that all of this puts the archdiocese in a unique position as it forms its seminarians for ordained ministry.

“It really gives them the opportunity to serve the Church and the young people in a way that the daily life of a seminary doesn’t allow,” he said. “It provides opportunities for them to engage with and have conversations with young people, with bishops and priests in a setting that’s much bigger than what the seminary is.”

Father Augenstein, who also ministers as pastor of Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ Parish in Indianapolis, said that about 50 seminarians assisted at NCYC in a variety of volunteer capacities. About half of them were archdiocesan seminarians. They coordinate the confession room at the conference, assist in liturgies and with clergy hospitality, direct pedestrian traffic and serve in the general volunteer pool.

“As priests, we’re called to serve the Church and the needs of the Church. Archbishop [Charles C.] Thompson often reminds the seminarians of the importance of thinking with the heart and the mind of the Church, not just what they know and what they’re comfortable with, where they live or grew up at,” Father Augenstein said. “And so, in a sense, when the larger Church comes to us in Indianapolis, our seminarians are able to experience what that looks like and be able to expand their understanding of the Church to help them in their future ministry.”

Long before a young man becomes a seminarian, though, his heart and mind has to become open to the possibility that God might be calling him to be a priest. Father Augenstein said that NCYC is a setting where that openness can emerge.

“For a lot of our young people, they come to NCYC and have the opportunity to see priests and religious and interact with them in a way that is bigger than their parish, to see the bigger Church and a bigger number of priests and religious,” he said. “That can be impactful on discernment.

“It opens them to see that the Church is bigger than their parish. Sometimes, that can help them understand that their call might be bigger than what they thought it was going to be.”

That was the case for transitional Deacon Khaing Thu, a member of St. Mark the Evangelist Parish in Indianapolis who expects to be ordained an archdiocesan priest next June.

He has served at NCYC four times as a seminarian. But before that, he attended it twice as a student at

Roncalli High School in Indianapolis.

“Praying together with tens of thousands of other young people from around the country had a great impact on me,” Deacon Thu said. “In the second time, especially, I was very serious in my thinking about the priesthood. Coming here reaffirmed me in my decision. It strengthened me to say ‘yes’ to God’s call to enter the seminary.”

His perspective on NCYC changed as a seminarian.

“I began to see the participants as the people that I would be serving one day,” Deacon Thu said. “As young as they are, being so energetic and on fire for the faith, they remind me of the time when I was a participant. It gives me hope and encouragement to really serve as a priest for them who are really thirsting for God. They want to be nourished with the sacraments.”

If Deacon Thu wants to know what it is like to come back to NCYC as a priest, he need only talk to Father Liam Hosty, ordained an archdiocesan priest last June and now serving as parochial vicar at St. Ann Parish in Indianapolis and St. Thomas More Parish in Mooresville.

Like Deacon Thu, he attended NCYC while a Roncalli student and then served at it as an archdiocesan seminarian.

“The presence of priests and religious and their joyful witness at the conference was instrumental in my discernment of the priesthood,” Father Hosty said. “In adoration and confession at the conference, I received so much.”

As a seminarian, Father Hosty began to see on a large scale in his service at NCYC that “the Church offers to young people what the world can’t give them. The Church offers them Jesus, which is his mystical body, the Church.”

Father Hosty added that his ministry as a seminarian at NCYC also “helped me to continue on with the first call that was planted in me as a young man, to know that this was the path that God was calling me to.”

Now as a priest, he was happy to come back to the conference and serve in a new and expanded way the teenagers whose place he was in years ago.

“I now know how fulfilling it is now as a priest to come back,” Father Hosty said. “It’s exciting. Now I can offer something more than I could as a seminarian, which is the sacraments. I also have the experience to know what the conference is about, to keep it Christ-centered.”

Ten years ago, Deacon Thu took part for the first time



Transitional Deacon Khaing Thu incenses the 16,000 Catholic teenagers worshipping on Nov. 22 at the closing Mass of the National Catholic Youth Conference at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. Seminarian Casey Deal, left, assists Deacon Thu. At right, transitional Deacon Samuel Hansen stands at the altar in the stadium. All are archdiocesan seminarians. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)

in the closing Mass of NCYC as a teenager, looking at the altar from afar while joining in prayer and worship with all of the thousands in Lucas Oil Stadium.

This year, he stood at the altar beside the closing Mass’ principal celebrant, Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson J. Perez.

“During the Mass, I was a little nervous, but above all, I felt I was exactly where I needed to be,” Deacon Thu told *The Criterion*. “I felt truly at peace because I have answered God’s call to serve at this altar. My vocational journey, moving from the seats of a participant to the role of a deacon, is a testament to the greatness of how God can work through all of us.

“As a teenager, I sometimes shuddered at the possibility of becoming a priest, but I never stopped listening to God. And I am glad I didn’t stop listening, because I am now the happiest that I can ever be, serving the Church alongside so many dedicated young Catholics.”

Father Benjamin Syberg, administrator *pro-tem* of Holy Angels Parish and St. Rita Parish, both in Indianapolis, is confident that there were young people at NCYC this year who are future priests and religious.

“In a way, there’s this purity and simplicity in the young people,” he said. “They’re the same. They’re always excited and so loving, joyful and prayerful. So, to see such good young people, I know that, in some of them, there’s a call.”

(To learn more about archdiocesan seminarians or about a vocation to the priesthood in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, visit www.HearGodsCall.com. To read an article about Pope Leo XIV’s message on vocations to NCYC participants, visit www.archindy.org/ncyc.) †

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their personalities. They’re truly so beautiful, and it’s not an outward appearance. You can tell spiritually that they’re blessed by God in such a special way.”



Alana Brooks-Murphy, an aspirant in the Salesian Sisters, sits atop a dunk tank on Nov. 20 in her religious community’s booth in the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis during the National Catholic Youth Conference held from Nov. 20-22. Some 16,000 Catholic teenagers from across the country came to Indianapolis for the conference. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)

Daniel Dachs came to NCYC with Brooke and other youths from the Helena Diocese. He said meeting so many religious “breaks stereotypes that religious life isn’t fun.”

“But they get to do things like this and reach out to different people,” Daniel said. “It makes having a vocation less intimidating. You know that they’re happy doing that.”

Bridget Lehner, a member of St. Jude Parish and a sophomore at Roncalli High School, both in Indianapolis, was impressed and encouraged by the witness of religious at NCYC.

“It’s really special to see how many people are living out the life that God wants for them,” she said. “It’s encouraging to see that whatever plan God has for me that I can live it out just like them.”

Benedictine Brother James Jensen, a monk of Saint Meinrad Archabbey in St. Meinrad, spoke with *The Criterion* at NCYC about the effect that attending youth conferences when he was younger had on him.

“I saw other youths my age that were active in their faith,” he said. “That gave me a bigger perspective on the Church.”

That broader view of the life of faith eventually led him to be open to and to discern his call as a Benedictine monk.

Brother James has worked with many youths and young adults in One Bread One Cup, a youth liturgical leadership conference held three times each summer by

Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology. From this, and from his own experience, he knows that an important part of discernment is putting oneself in silence before God.

So, he’s glad that NCYC has places for teens to enter into that silence, like its eucharistic adoration chapel and a relic chapel, which is new this year at the conference. And this year, just as in years past at NCYC, the cavernous Lucas Oil Stadium was enveloped in silence as the 16,000 youths at the conference all entered into eucharistic adoration.

“That tells us of the depth of their heart and that they’re open to silence,” Brother James said. “They just may not have experienced it before. So, something like NCYC gives them the ability to experience it. Then they take it back to their parish where they might have a regular holy hour.

“At the least, they might appreciate more, if nothing else, the silence in the liturgy that is already at the heart of the Church.”

Sophie Clark, a teenager from Helena, Mont., who was at her second NCYC, appreciates the way that she and so many of her peers enter into silent prayer during the conference, listening to God speaking in their hearts.

“It shows how great our faith is if we’re all willing to be that reverent,” she said, “and respect the Lord that much that we’re all willing to be quiet and be still for so long.” †

Teens at NCYC view service as a way to ‘grow deeper’ in their faith

By Mike Krokos

While the interactive exhibit hall in the Indiana Convention Center has become a destination for National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) participants to buy merchandise, visit booths for information on vocations and to take time and have fun doing things like playing cornhole or singing, there is usually an opportunity for young people to serve their brothers and sisters in need. This year was no different.

In a corner tucked away from the excitement at the center of the gathering area, four service projects were available for the teenagers and other attendees to take part in.

A theme of “transformed” was featured front and center in the service area, reminding participants that after receiving the Eucharist they are tasked to take the faith out into the world to serve others.

Ally Stechschulte, Georgia Hagen and Anna Honse, teens from the Diocese of Toledo, Ohio, signed slips of paper outside a Catholic Relief Services (CRS) booth, urging Congress to put money back into international aid programs that provide for the less fortunate. Those funds were cut earlier this year.

Laura Sheehan, archdiocesan Catholic Charities-Social Concerns special projects coordinator, was among the volunteers manning the CRS booth.

“We’re asking specifically for international aid to be restored to Catholic Relief Services so that they can continue to serve the poorest of the poor around the world,” she said.

CRS organizers set a lofty goal during the NCYC outreach, hoping to garner 10,000 signatures during the three-day gathering of faith.

Not far away, Hearts in Motion, an international, non-denominational organization, was encouraging young people to make T-shirt bags to send medical supplies to Guatemala, where volunteers do much of their work.

Ava Washburn, Alexa Johnson and Kiera McNally, all high school juniors from the Archdiocese of Dubuque, Iowa, were meticulous as they carefully cut shirts as part of the project.

“I like to help with community service-type things, and this is a good cause,” Ava explained.

Joe Hardesty of Evansville, Ind., a volunteer for Hearts in Motion, has been involved in the ministry for several years.

“I went on my first trip last summer with my two older sons, on a high school trip, and built one of the homes [in Guatemala], ... and I just fell in love with it,” he said.

“We’re here today to educate the people, as well as to get the name out,” he added.

Benedictine Sister Kathleen Yeadon, a member of Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove who works for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul food pantry in Indianapolis, asked attendees in another nearby area to take part in a food and security grocery challenge.

“They go through, they get a little story here, and then they try and make that budget work,” she explained, with each person given a specific money amount as they walk through and examine the prices of available groceries.

“It’s just that awareness of how difficult it is to shop for your family,” Sister Kathleen added.

In another area, Kelli Reutman supervised young people who were making mats for the homeless by taking plastic bags and weaving them together. The plastic yarn is known as “plarn.”

“I’m told it takes about 2,000 bags to make one mat, and about 10 hours of weaving,” explained Reutman, who works as associate director of evangelization for Catalyst Catholic in the New Albany Deanery, where she supports 16 parishes.

The initiative began at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany, and the mats are given to the homeless in southern Indiana and in Louisville, Ky.

Sela Kubiak, a senior from the Archdiocese of Detroit, was eager to take a few minutes to help with the weaving process.

“If we’re already going to be here to praise God and grow deeper in our faith, there’s no better way to do that than doing it through service,” she said.

A few feet away, Kayla Jacobs of Catholic Climate Covenant took the time to educate attendees about



Volunteer Kelli Reutman of Catalyst Catholic in the New Albany Deanery, left, supervises Sela Kubiak of the Archdiocese of Detroit as she helps make a mat for the homeless by taking plastic bags and weaving them together. (Photo by Mike Krokos)

the impact of the environment on people who are experiencing homelessness.

Attendees, in turn, walked on a “pilgrimage” collecting items to place in a kit for those in need.

“They are more exposed to the elements, they have a higher chance of getting skin cancer [and] of having acute-related illnesses or strokes,” she said. “Our goal is to make 1,000 packets to donate locally for people who are experiencing homelessness that will include hydration packs, water bottles, food, blankets, wool socks, sunscreen ... things that will help them bear the elements better.”

At the end of their pilgrimage, teens were encouraged to write a note for the homeless person who will receive a kit.

Grace Welch, a freshman from the Diocese of Winona-Rochester in Minnesota, took several minutes to pen a letter.

“I feel, if I was homeless, this would help me get through the hard times,” she said. “Kindness and generosity are always very good. They really help people.” †

Funny hats show the joy of NCYC while messages feature the heart of youths’ faith

By John Shaughnessy

When it comes to creative, attention-getting fashion that always makes people smile, participants at the National Catholic Youth Conference have a tradition of wearing a wide variety of headgear that adds another flavor of fun to the faith-filled event.

And that tradition has continued this year as the youths have showcased just about everything from pirate hats to headgear featuring pizza and tacos.



The simple T-shirt message of “Destination Heaven” marks the ultimate goal of the youths at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 20-22. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

So, here’s a tip of the hat to some of our favorite headgear and the groups that have added an extra touch of joy to the conference.

The young woman from St. Rita Parish in Indianapolis who went old school with a red-and-white hat reminiscent of Dr. Seuss’ Cat in the Hat.

The flashing and flashy sparkling pink cowboy hats of a group of female youths from the Diocese of Kansas City, Kan.

The show-your-state’s-pride of a group from St. John Vianney Parish in Bettendorf, Iowa, in the Diocese of Davenport, who rocked corn-in-the husk headgear.

And the group from the Diocese of Saint Cloud in Minnesota whose headgear featured flamingoes—a choice they couldn’t explain but that still made people smile.

Of course, there’s also a hometown nod to the floppy, black-and-white cow headgear that the 1,563 participants from the Archdiocese of Indianapolis turned into a fashion statement.

Yet while the hats always showcase their fun, it’s the T-shirts the youths wear that profess their faith.

Here’s a sampling of the faith-related T-shirts from this year’s conference:

“I saw the pope at NCYC.”

“Faith over fear.”

“Enjoy being Catholic.”

“In all things, give thanks.”

“Do all that you do with love.”

“Be saints.”

“Magnify like Mary.”

“Lead like Joan.”

“Love like Therese.”



Vivian McCombs, left, Frankie Gotto and Addison Allaman of St. John Vianney Parish in Bettendorf, Iowa, in the Diocese of Davenport, show their state pride by wearing corn-in-the-husk headgear during the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis on Nov. 20-22. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

“Life gave me lemons, but my Jesus, He be makin’ lemonade.”

“Be not afraid.”

“Destination heaven.”

“Created by the Creator.”

“I am a child of God.”

“Make beautiful things happen.” †