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'Youth of the church are here to help back you up'

by Teresa Malcolm



From left, Sr. Nancy Gerth, Rebecca Hardy, Samantha Savich and Sr. Janet Gildea knit bags at the booth for the Sisters of Charity Federation at the National Catholic Youth Conference. (Photos by Teresa Malcolm)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- Amid the cacophony of noise and boisterous activity in the massive exhibit hall of the National Catholic Youth Conference here Nov. 21, two teenagers had settled at a table with two Sisters of Charity. All four heads were bent over a craft project: knitting strips of discarded plastic shopping bags into sturdy reusable bags.

The Sisters of Charity Federation had chosen the activity for their booth as a way to engage young conference participants, giving them a chance to sit and talk while learning a skill. In the case of Rebecca Hardy, 16, and Samantha Savich, 17, both youth group members at St. John Vianney Parish in the Detroit archdiocese, both bags and conversation had drawn them in.

For Hardy, it was a lucky chance to chat with Sr. Nancy Gerth, 46, who used to be a social worker -- and that is Hardy's career goal. "We have so much in common," Hardy said. The junior in high school laughed as she recalled that she has a great aunt who is a nun, but "she just talks to me like I'm 6." Hardy told

Gerth and her colleague, Sr. Janet Gildea, 53: "It's nice you guys talk to us like we're adults and we had a conversation."









Of the many talks and workshops in the offering at the Nov. 19-21 conference, both Hardy and Savich were full of enthusiasm for Fr. Tony Ricard, a New Orleans priest and an instructor at Xavier University's Institute for Black Catholic Studies. Ricard's theme, "Don't Be Stupid!" could be spotted on T-shirts and other memorabilia as you walked among the conference's crowds.

Hardy explained, "The difference is ignorance is doing something wrong and not knowing it's wrong. Stupidity is doing it and knowing it's wrong, and still doing it anyway. That just stuck with me: How many times a day do you do something you know is wrong, but you still do it?"

Ricard encouraged his listeners to "remember who you belong to," Savich said. "You belong to your family and God, and never to forget that."

Savich hoped to carry the impact of the event into her life at home. "When we go on retreats for our church, it's always for the week or weekend your full heart is there for God," she said. "Then you usually do that at home for a week or two and then you forget about it. But this, with more than 100 people here -- it's like thousands, it has a bigger impact. More of the youth of the church are here to help back you up."

While Hardy said she's always willing to talk about her faith, just the nature of this event will give her even more to talk about: "How many places can you say you've been to with 20,000 teenagers that love their faith this much?"

On Saturday afternoon, Daryse Matheus had already decided on one action she would take when she got home to Queens, N.Y. She planned to undertake the H2O Challenge, a project organized by one of the exhibitors (www.theh20project.org) that aims to raise awareness about water issues and money to fund wells in poor communities around the world. "If I was at home, I probably wouldn't have done anything like this," Matheus said.

She and Victoria Hall-Swartz, a fellow youth group member at Immaculate Conception Parish in Queens in the Brooklyn diocese, both praised the "Defying Gravity" workshop, led by youth ministers Marilyn Santos and Stan Cordero. It tackled the subject of racism, "which is a very important issue that should be brought up," said Matheus, "not just to the Catholic youth, but to all over the world." But the workshop also earned high marks from these two 17-year-olds for using songs from "Wicked" to explore the theme -- they're both big fans of that Broadway musical.

It was just one example of how workshops presented material in ways that would appeal to teenagers, they said. "They brought it down to a level that we can relate to," Matheus said, "so we can go back and not only change our lives, but express it to other people."

"I hope our talk is not cheap and we actually do something about it," Hall-Swartz said. "I feel a lot of people here, they'll say they're going to make a difference, that it did affect them, and it really doesn't. I hope people really get into it."

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"We have to make a difference," Matheus agreed. "They say we are the future and it is true. So we have to make changes."

Approximately 21,000 participants, youth and adult chaperones, attended the National Catholic Youth Conference, which was sponsored by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, and hosted by the archdiocese of Kansas City, Kan., and the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo. This year's conference is titled "Christ Reigns."

At a general session Nov. 20, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of the Galveston-Houston archdiocese led a prayer session, in which he said that the "young church is a powerful church."

Among the workshops and presentations were:

- Bishop's roundtables, in which groups of 20-25 youths could meet with some of the U. S. bishops in attendance, along with a facilitator, to discuss topics of the attendee's choosing.
- "We Cry Justice," an MTV-like presentation of music videos on a giant screen with live songs

presented by former British rock musician Sal Solo and representatives from Catholic Relief Services.

- 'Women of Worth,' an interactive talk by Joia Farmer and Amanda Vernon on finding one's true value in God as a woman.
- 'The Unit,' a session utilizing current media, stories and Catholic principles to help youth have a holier family, presented by Randy Raus, a member of the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministers.

Other sessions offered were 'Best Practices for Parenting Teens'; 'There's Something About Mary' (a presentation on the importance and beauty of Marian devotion); 'Youth Ministry 101: The Nuts and Bolts'; 'What Does Climate Change Have to Do With My Catholic Faith?'; 'Making Room for Christ: The Adult Spiritual Journey'; 'You Booze, You Lose'; and 'Modest is Hottest.'

See more photos at our earlier story: **[The 'young church is a powerful church'](#)**

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