

Retreats and Conferences Summary

There is a lot of confusion about the many retreats and conferences that are available for Directors of Youth Ministry and young people across the country. Below is a summary of the many opportunities that are available each year along with an editorial on each by Kevin Bohli.

I would recommend that each Director of Youth Ministry and youth ministry volunteer attend at least one conference and one spiritual retreat every year. You should speak with your pastors about paying for these activities out of the youth ministry budget.

Youth Ministry Conferences for Adults

Conferences are a great opportunity to learn new ministry practices, to spend time with thousands of other youth ministers who share your joys and struggles, and to make contacts with organizations, speakers, or performers from across the country. They also help to motivate you to become recommitted to your ministry and help prevent burnout.

- **Youth Specialties National Youth Workers Convention** – each year there are three of these conferences in the fall...one on the west coast, one in the Midwest, and one on the east coast. Go to www.youthspecialties.com for more information and for this year's dates. Each conference consists of about 3000 youth workers from all Christian denominations. This conference is supposed to be "inter-denominational", but you will find that Catholics are poorly represented when it comes to the entertainment, speakers, and resources. The talks and resources are excellent training on the basics of youth ministry, and in identifying the behavior of adolescents today, but everything must be taken with a "grain of salt" and you need to modify what you hear to apply the practices and ideas in your Catholic youth program. Cost for the 4 day conference is about \$300 plus transportation, lodging, and meals. I would recommend that if you have never been to one of these, it is worth experiencing at least once.
- **Steubenville Adult Conferences** – The Franciscan University of Steubenville offers a variety of summer conferences for adults. There is a Defending the Faith conference, an Applied Biblical Studies conference, and John Bosco Conference (for Catechists and Youth Ministers) to name a few... go to www.franciscanconferences.com to get a complete list. They are a mixture of a conference and a retreat with a variety of talks, prayer experiences, and opportunity for receiving the sacraments. I find Steubenville Conferences to be orthodox in their teaching and a good balance of catechesis with charismatic music and Masses. Cost is about \$260 for conference, meals, and lodging.
- **National Conference on Catholic Youth Ministry (NCCYM)** – This conference is offered in the winter in the even numbered years by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (www.NFCYM.org). This is a Catholic version of the Youth Specialties conference discussed above. After the poor experience of the conference in Las Vegas in 2006 by twenty five Arlington CYMs, there has been little interest in returning.

Retreats for Youth Ministers

An annual spiritual retreat is vital to your ability to minister to young people. If you are not deeply rooted in prayer and find strength in your relationship with God, then you will not be successful in encouraging young people to do the same. You may get teens to follow you, but you will not be getting them to follow Christ.

- **Arlington Diocese Youth Ministry Retreat** –A two day retreat in the late winter to give the Directors of Youth Ministry and their volunteers quiet time to spend listening to the Lord’s call in their lives and an opportunity to make resolutions to focus their lives on that call. Of course you cannot get a group of youth ministers together for two days without having a ton of laughs and good community building. Cost will always be minimal to keep money from prohibiting you to attend.
- **Other retreats** – There are other religious orders in the area that offer retreats for all Catholic men and women. Some of these retreats are guided, and some are just quiet weekend getaways. Personally, I think that you should look for guided retreats to help motivate your thoughts and reflections. I also think that a retreat designed for youth ministers provides certain benefits that you would not see at a generic retreat for all Catholic men and women. However, any time alone with God is well worth it!

Conferences for Youth

Conferences are a great opportunity for your young people to see that the Catholic Church is larger than just your parish or the Arlington diocese.

- **Steubenville Summer Youth Conferences** – The Franciscan University of Steubenville offers several three-day summer conferences for young people at their main campus in Ohio, and also has them located at various areas around the country. Go to www.franciscanyouth.com for a complete list. They often have a great lineup of speakers, are heavy on the praise and worship music, and place a strong emphasis on Mass and the Eucharist. The Arlington diocese sponsors a trip to this conference each summer. Cost is approximately \$240 per youth which includes transportation.
- **World Youth Day** – Every two to three years, the Vatican calls for a World Youth Day celebration. This is a world-wide gathering of young Catholics to celebrate their common faith. The Office of Youth Ministry organizes a pilgrimage to this event, but parishes are free to organize their own separate trips. The great part about this event is that the young people get to experience the Catholic Church on the international level and meet youth from all over the world (and hopefully go to Mass with the Pope!). The bad part is that it is difficult to keep 16-18 year olds focused on the true spirit of pilgrimage in the midst of a carnival atmosphere, intense heat, long walks, and huge crowds.
- **National Catholic Youth Convention** – The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry offers this convention during the fall of the odd numbered years. The conference consists of 20,000 Catholic young people gathering in a stadium twice a day for prayer, music, and nationally known Catholic speakers. There are breakout sessions throughout the conference for other speakers, and there is a hall filled with vendors, organizations, and religious orders. The main concern with this conference is that it is expensive to attend (around \$800 with transportation), and the young people will have to take 1-2 days off of

school to attend. The young people that attended from Arlington in the past enjoyed themselves, but it was not a particularly educational or spiritual experience.

Retreats for Young People

Listed below are several retreat opportunities for your young people, but I would not substitute them for an annual weekend retreat for just the young people of your parish. These larger retreats may each serve a need for your parish, but are not as effective in bringing your young people into a cohesive community or in stimulating a conversion in their lives. If you have questions about how to lead a retreat for your youth, be sure to contact the Office of Youth Ministry.

- **Mount 2000 and Beyond** – A weekend Eucharistic retreat at Mount St. Mary's College and Seminary in Emmitsburg, MD. This retreat for 1500 young people has been known to fill up early, so be sure to check their website in September of each year to find the dates for registration (www.mount2000andbeyond.com/). Cost is typically \$35 per student which includes meals and housing. This retreat consists of many hours of Eucharistic adoration, and has a large emphasis on chastity. This is more of a conference than a retreat, and the huge number of young people makes it very difficult to keep track of the ones that you bring. I wish that the organizers would reserve Eucharistic Adoration for special times throughout the weekend. In my opinion, having Jesus exposed for the entire time does not teach the young people to have a special reverence for Eucharistic adoration.

YOUTH 2000, Teens Encounter Christ (TEC), Youth Encounter, SEARCH – These are all retreat programs that you may or may not be familiar with. Each is an organization that looks for volunteers to run these retreats on a regular basis within the diocese. Each has its good points and bad points. I believe that none of these organizations can run a retreat that is ideal for all of the youth of your parish, and that is why I have not initiated any of these programs on a regular basis in the Arlington Diocese. I think that it is up to each of you to plan retreats that meet the current needs of your program. I am also a proponent of single-sex retreats and would be happy to discuss my reasoning with you.