

## At High School Youth Rally, young Catholics encouraged to love like Christ

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*Teens from across the area participate in the Archdiocese of Washington's March 2 High School Youth Rally held at The Catholic University of America. (Archdiocese of Washington photo/Jaclyn Lippelmann)*

The opening prayer at the Archdiocese of Washington's second annual High School Youth Rally on March 2 included the words, "Come Holy Spirit, give us courage to open our hearts," and that helped set the tone for a day of praise, fellowship, and reflection for about 70 young people gathered at The Catholic University of America, contemplating the words of *1 John* 4:19: "We love because he first loved us." That biblical verse inspired the rally's theme, "Love Like That" and offered an encouragement for the youth to love others as Christ has loved them.

The morning kicked off with praise music from the Full Armor Band, young Christian artists from New York, whose audiences have included Pope Benedict XVI and thousands of young people nationwide.

Hans Banag, a high school junior and member of Mother Seton Parish in Germantown, Maryland, was one of the youth leaders and organizers of this rally as a member of the Archdiocesan Youth Advisory Team. This diverse team of high school leaders organizes ways to bring a voice to the youth in Washington. "Events like today are so important because they're a chance for young people to socialize, to be made more comfortable, and then actually talk about their faith," Banag said.



*Archdiocesan Youth Advisory Team members participate in the archdiocese's second annual High School Youth Rally. (Archdiocese of Washington photo/Jaclyn Lippelmann)*

After morning praise music and some introductory games, the students listened to speakers reflect on the rally's theme and emulate God's in their everyday lives.

Father Martino Choi, a parochial vicar at St. Patrick Parish in Rockville, Maryland, reflected on feeling awed by the Earth's beauty and how he, like all of God's children, did nothing to deserve it or God's love. He said that's why it's so important for people to discern their vocations so they can love others with this selflessness. Father Choi defined vocation as the "the intersection of God's love for us and our love for him," and shared some of the obstacles he faced in his own discernment to be a priest. While a career and family life were an option for Father Choi, he shared that he heard God say in prayer, "That's a great plan, but it's not MY plan." He told the youth that every vocation has its difficulties, but that "following God's plan will give you a happiness that doesn't just come and go."



*Father Martino Choi, a parochial vicar at St. Patrick Parish in Rockville, and Sister Maria Veritas of the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist spoke about their vocations during the Archdiocese of Washington's High School Youth Rally. (Archdiocese of Washington photo/Jaclyn Lippelmann)*

Sister Maria Veritas, of the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist echoed the notion that people's true vocations might not be easily distinguished. She explained that she had various interests growing up, notably writing and research, and eventually attended Harvard University. Yet during her undergraduate studies, she felt that God was calling her to come and be His spouse, and she said this vocation fills her with "peace and joy."

"You're approaching an age full of hard decisions," she told the room full of teens. Sister Maria Veritas noted that choices about high school, college, careers, and families are in the minds of young people in the Church. Yet, she also said, "You need to pause and still show love exactly where you are in life."

She reminded the students that blessing themselves with the sign of the cross is a "radical sign" of Christ's powerful love, and then she listed accessible ways of doing that, like helping siblings with homework, or parents with housework, which she described as radical small acts of love. "Take up your cross and do it cheerfully," she said, encouraging the youth to seek virtues.

Many of the youth in attendance were from Our Lady Help of Christians Parish in Waldorf, Maryland, where there is a religious education program for Confirmation candidates, and a Life Teen program.

Shawn Harley, an eighth grader, and Lesly Valenzuela Delacruz, a ninth grader from that parish, are both preparing for Confirmation this spring. "This rally is helpful just knowing what gifts God gave me to worship him, to follow in His footsteps. Being here with my friends gives me confidence that God is at my side, and if I'm struggling, they help me," Harley remarked. He said he's looking forward to Confirmation because, "It's another

step toward God, being at peace with Him.” Similarly, Delacruz said, “Being here (at the rally) is like getting closer to God. Confirmation will help me be more a part of the Catholic Church.”



*Youth pray during the archdiocese's High School Youth Rally. (Archdiocese of Washington photo/Jaclyn Lippelmann)*

Another participant, Schumy Pascal, said, “It’s nice to talk with other students about faith,” especially if that person is “struggling with something like stress about school or temptations.” She said she prays for guidance whenever she feels overwhelmed, asking God, “What am I supposed to do now?”

After the talks on the rally’s theme, students had time for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and reconciliation.

Nehemiah Strawberry, member of Life Teen and the Youth Leadership Team at Our Lady Help of Christians Parish, is a ninth grader studying engineering. “I’m glad to see there are a

diverse group of students that are ready to enter into their Catholic faith,” he said.

Reflecting on the day’s events, he said, “The music is uplifting, and Sister’s talk taught me that if you’re on track to do something successful, God’s plan can help you accomplish those goals.” In fact, he’s considering Harvard, too. Strawberry appreciated that while some teenagers might attend events like this in obligation for sacrament preparation, other students like himself are “taking the initiative” to come by choice, and take steps in their faith journeys independently.

Tex Phelps, director of youth ministry for the archdiocese said, “This year’s High School Rally offered different opportunities for the youth to encounter Christ through Mass, Adoration, speakers and tours of the shrines of the Immaculate Conception and Saint John Paul II. The hope is that everyone in attendance strengthened their faith and will share this experience with their family and community to bring Christ to others.”