

In the Heartland
Ministering to our Youth and Young Adults

By Bishop Richard Pates
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Among the top priorities for Pope Francis in the coming year as he leads the Catholic Church is youth ministry. The Synod of Bishops due to be held in October 2018 has taken the theme: *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*. Moreover, he speaks frequently of the upcoming World Youth Day to be held in Panama, January 2019. *“Its theme is: I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”* (Luke 1:38)

We are blessed in today’s Church with many committed and spirited youth and young adults who engage the faith wholeheartedly and seek to live it with conviction. Their presence and activity are very uplifting to me. But the absorption of faith is not an automatic and we are aware that the faith needs to be conscientiously handed on, especially to the younger generation who often find themselves adrift in the sea of secularism.

The Diocese of Des Moines joins with Pope Francis and the thrust of diocesan churches in the United States in prioritizing our ministry to youth and young adults. Our ministry to them is characterized by accompaniment which has three components: the first is the handing on of the information through study of the bible and the catechism of the Catholic Church. This leads to faith expressed in service in the Spirit of Jesus. Secondly, a personal relationship with Jesus, fortified by prayer is essential. This relationship anchors the individual in sustaining and growing the faith. Finally, the body of Christ grows through community. Young people are heavily influenced by their peers in their outlook and values. It is critical that small faith-sharing groups be incorporated into the scheme of ministry with them.

Recently, the diocese has been undertaking the “Changing of the Guard” in leadership positions which provide ministry to youth. We have been blessed by the likes of Dr. Jerry Deegan, Father

Joseph Pins, Tessa Roberts, and the combination of Chris Wadle and Joe Connolly at the St. Thomas More Center and Catholic Youth Camp in providing strong foundations for the challenges that lay ahead in developing religious adherence to the church.

In this outreach to the young church, the diocese is particularly pleased to welcome:

Dr. Dan Ryan who will assume the Presidency of Dowling Catholic High this coming fall. Dr. Ryan intends to follow the lead of his predecessor and focus on the Catholic identity of Dowling Catholic. Important are two dimensions – vitalizing the institutional dimensions of curriculum, prayer activities and service with the engagement of personal transformation and being attentive to the role which faculty, administrators and coaches play in the witness of faith personally and institutionally as a very localized “Body of Christ.”

Father Ross Parker as Vocation Director inherits a wonderful cohort of 20 seminarians along with a lengthy list of young men and women who have related that they are currently thinking and praying about a possible vocation. Vocations to the religious life arise out of a culture that prays for and supports the discernment of possible candidates. Statistics point to the undeniable importance of priests who promote the calling and parents who open the doors of freedom to allow their children to make this choice.

Mr. Justin White will serve as the new Diocesan Director of Youth and Young Adults. He has built up a reputation not only of being an effective teacher of religion at Dowling Catholic but also as an individual who accompanies his students in the development of their personal faith with all its challenges. It is this pastoral dimension of his ministry that led him to pursue the position in the diocese. Concentration of his efforts will be on senior high students and young adults. He will provide classic theological background with a passion to incorporate it with a faith life that is solid.

A new Director of St. Thomas More Center and Catholic Youth Camp is currently being recruited. The CYC camp has been especially effective in developing generations of young faithful in the diocesan community. The program highlights peer influence and the impact

shared faith has on each of us. It is the goal of the Search Committee for the new director to tap into this tradition and give strength to the growing momentum.

Preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation and highlighting its reception have been strengthening and positively influencing the faith development of our teens in their sophomore and junior years of high school these past five years. Dedicated coordinators and catechists have developed programs composed of instruction, intensive prayer experiences such as retreats and opportunities for service. The confirmandi are able to fulfill the sacraments of initiation with the investment of themselves and a personal response to the initiative of the Holy Spirit. The Sacrament has become a backbone of our religious outreach to teens and illustrates the power of integrating instruction, prayer, service and peer influence in handing on and sustaining the faith.

While there is no doubt that the church faces challenges as we seek to give birth to the young church, we are grateful that dedicated and competent servant leaders are emerging from our ranks. They generate well-placed confidence as they undertake their roles in our church community. They are employing practices originating from the early days of the church and extend a tradition that holds ultimate meaning of life for those whom they serve.