

# Teens challenged to respect people of all ages, conditions

written by Tara Little |



Each year youth from across Arkansas get together on the eve of the Mass and March for Life to reflect on what it means to respect life.

This year, 688 high school teens and their adult youth leaders from 36 Catholic parishes participated in Weekend Extravaganza Jan. 19-20.

The event, which is an overnight lock-in, is held at the Donaghey Student Center at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. It is sponsored by the diocese's Catholic Youth Ministry Office.

Liz Tingquist, diocesan youth director, said this event is "the one time that we get to take a weekend away from what the world says and think about what God says" about the dignity of human life.

Between the prayer services, live music, skits and talks from different speakers, a broad range of life issues were covered.

In addition to leading a prayer service about abortion and showing a video about teen suicide, the diocesan Youth Advisory Council presented "Voice of the Disabled." While slides showing the faces of the disabled were flashed on a large screen, off-stage, teens gave those faces a voice by sharing their struggles with not being accepted in a world that doesn't value them. The message was all people have dignity because they are created in the image and likeness of God regardless of any physical or mental disability.

Msgr. Scott Friend, diocesan director of vocations, talked to the teens about his struggles living with multiple sclerosis, an autoimmune disease that affects the central nervous system. And Marianne Linane, diocesan respect life director, spoke about bioethics, particularly her work in stem-cell research.

Denise Shewmake from St. Joseph's Helpers, a Catholic crisis pregnancy center, also spoke about the organization's work and accepted the baby items collected for the center from the 36 parish youth groups in attendance. Tingquist said everything from diapers to car seats were donated.

The featured speaker was 29-year-old entrepreneur Tarek Saab of Fort Worth, Texas. After being a contestant on NBC's "The Apprentice 5," in 2006, he began speaking to Catholic teens and young adults around the United States. Saab, who is part Lebanese, attends the Maronite Church, an Eastern Catholic Church in communion with Rome.

In his presentation, Saab talked about a wide range of issues that make it hard to be a Catholic Christian in today's world.

He shared the lessons he learned about true happiness and what really matters. Rather than wealth or celebrity in this world, success is about achieving salvation in the next.

He said there is a “war on you” in today’s world and “many of our enemies are the people we look up to.”

He said many celebrities “don’t care about you” because they serve their own interests. The same is true with some politicians and organizations.

Regarding the abortion issue, he said, “Planned Parenthood is a \$1 billion industry. They don’t care about women’s rights. They don’t care about you. They don’t care about me. They care about the almighty dollar.”

He also challenged the men in the audience to be knights who provide and protect women and asked the women to respect themselves by how they dress and present themselves.

He told the teens that being Catholic today is “very, very difficult. But, Christ once said that if the world hates you, know that it hated me first.”

It is not only OK to be countercultural, “it is necessary,” he said.

Teens who spoke with *Arkansas Catholic* liked Saab’s presentation, though each benefited from it in different ways.

Lauren Lavender, 17, a senior from Christ the King Church in Little Rock, said, “I absolutely loved the talk by Tarek Saab. He was really funny. He broke up his seriousness. It’s kind of hard to get 700 teenagers to sit still and really listen for an hour.”

“I like how he gave advice to men and women separately and he could relate to us,” she said.

Jason Kramer, 16, a junior from St. Raphael Church in Springdale, said he liked what Saab said about being Catholic is accepting all the teachings of the Church and embracing the mysteries of the faith even when the world says everything has to be explained.

“The thing about being Catholic is kind of, you either are or you’re not. There’s no gray area,” he said.

Catherine Schraegle, 18, a senior from Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Little Rock, said she agreed with Saab when he said “the media is trying to pull us away from what should be our ideals” but was concerned by other teens in the audience who seemed to focus on his celebrity rather than his message.

“Everyone kept asking questions like, what it was like to meet Donald Trump. How would you feel if you had won ‘The Apprentice,’” she said. “Well, he’s not talking about that. He just said in his introduction that he’s using his 15 minutes of reality TV fame as a springboard to get a greater message across.”

The lock-in, which also included a dance and gym activities, concluded with the Mass for Life at the Statehouse Convention Center followed by the march to the Capitol on Sunday, Jan. 20.