

Diocese educates youth on social justice in Arkansas

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |



Catholic teens recently got an up-close look at the Church's social justice teachings.

The annual Catholic Charities Summer Institute, known as C²SI, took place July 8-12 at St. John Center in Little Rock. Co-sponsored by Catholic Charities of Arkansas and the Catholic Youth Ministry Office, 69 high school students, including incoming high school freshmen and students who recently graduated, learned about social issues in Arkansas, what the Church says about social justice and took part in hands-on community service around the city.

"We're the Church of social justice, the Catholic Church, and so we wanted to use this camp to help young people understand social justice and what that looks like and what that means in action," Liz Tingquist, diocesan youth ministry director, said.

The program began in 2007 out of a desire for youth ministers to put together a mission trip. After much prayer, Tingquist and Tricia Gentry, diocesan youth ministry program coordinator, decided to focus on the mission field here in Arkansas. Young people "need to know what's going on in their own state," Tingquist said. "We wanted to make it something that was educational, not just going and doing community service."

Before attending the camp, sophomore Lily Kennedy from Sacred Heart Church in Charleston said she "didn't realize how many people in need live in Little Rock." After volunteering at Jericho Way, a homeless day center in Little Rock, she said she found that "it was amazing

seeing how happy people in need were, even in the midst of not having much.”

Sixteen-year-old Pascha Wistrand of St. Agnes Church in Mena noticed that “people that are suffering, they still have joy in their life and they’re still happy, which is hard to do sometimes.”

Volunteers also did work at the Arkansas Food Bank, Habitat for Humanity, Arkansas Pregnancy Resource Center and Little Rock Compassion Center. They sorted donations, cleaned and painted and assisted clients and customers.

With ever-changing social issues and high school students participating multiple times, there is a different theme each year for the Catholic Charities Summer Institute. This year’s theme was the dignity of the human person. In the mornings, there was an emphasis on social justice education. Participants heard from guest speakers on topics such as homelessness, immigration and human trafficking. In the afternoon, they volunteered at work sites around the city.

The young people participating have learned a lot from their experiences at the camp.

What drew Zach Ellis, a rising senior at Catholic High School in Little Rock, to C²SI was the opportunity to take part in hands-on service.

“Jesus, he practiced agape, which is that self-sacrificing love,” he said. “We, as Catholics and Christians, are called to live in that world. And I think that the greatest way that we can do that is to give ourselves to service and try and live in that sacrificial way.”

Eighteen-year-old Angel Martinez’s favorite aspect of the week was watching other people grow. The parishioner at St. James Church in Searcy said he loved “seeing other people helping out with each other, as well as seeing people grow in their faith.” He also got to “witness such great things that each individual gets out of retreats or events, especially here at C² right now,” he said.

The educational component of the Catholic Charities Summer Institute is one of the most important aspects of the camp, Tingquist said.

“Over the years I think it’s really enlightening to (participants) to think of a world outside of themselves,” she said. “I think at the very least, it’s just opening their minds to be more open to things and helping them to get out of their comfort zone and know what it means to be an evangelist.”

Be countercultural and speak on social justice

written by Bishop Anthony B. Taylor |

How many of you have been at one of my confirmation Masses this year? If so, the first part of

this homily will be very familiar to you.

Remember what I said about salmon and other fish that live in rivers? They are constantly swimming against the current. If they didn't, they'd all eventually end up in the ocean, carried away by the current. The struggle against the current makes for strong fish muscles and good eating that pond-raised fish can't match. Going against the flow requires strength and makes them strong.

In today's Gospel Jesus says it is the same for his apostles. His message is countercultural and so following him will entail swimming against the current of public opinion. He says we will be like sheep in the midst of wolves — "led before governors and kings for his sake as a witness before them," handed over even by members of our own family, "hated by all."

No one can accuse Jesus of trying to collect followers by pretending that doing God's will is always going to be easy, pleasant and well received. Indeed, he continually promises a cross and that what doesn't kill them will make them strong: "whoever endures to the end will be saved."

The same is true today. You participants in C2SI have spent a week looking at some of the social and moral teachings of the Church in matters which bear on the dignity of the human person, issues where we are countercultural, where we are in a lot of ways swimming against the current of public opinion. Issues of social justice and human rights.

The special claims that the poor have on us, people who have no voice, whom society disregards — for instance, the homeless, refugees and victims of human trafficking — and the imperative to do what we can to work to make changes in our society to address these evils. We don't usually get much push-back when we do works of charity, other than perhaps being dismissed as "do-gooders."

But people really do get their back up when we speak out about people's rights. For instance, the God-given right that people have to immigrate when desperate circumstances so require — and obligation to welcome them with open arms.

Or the immorality of the death penalty, or the need to restructure our economy in a way that better serves the poor, or the universal right to receive medical care. And many other issues, for instance, the gender ideology that ignores the specific physical body that God gave us — which is an area that you learned about this week. And I could name a half-dozen other social and moral topics that bear on the dignity of the human person as well.

We are countercultural and when we voice these truths, lots of people don't like it. But in the end, the truth will prevail. "The light is stronger than the darkness." "Whoever endures to the end will be saved."

So if you intend to be faithful to Jesus and his teaching regarding the dignity of the human person, expect to spend your life swimming against the current. That's what our seminarians are doing, which is what makes their witness so powerful and challenging.

The Lord may well be calling some of you to follow him in this inspiring countercultural way as well. And some of you young ladies to serve him in religious life, which may be even more countercultural, given how our society currently views women.

These days we cannot expect the support of our increasingly pagan society and sometimes not even the support of family members and friends who have drifted from really living the faith, which is why it is so important for us to learn how to support each other in living our faith. Jesus talks about persecution and rejection, but even incomprehension can be very painful — especially in the teenage years when it is so important to feel accepted, but later too. I've experienced it and so will you if you truly give yourself over fully to the Lord and his will for your life.

After all, just as with salmon and trout, going against the flow and doing what you know is right when doing so is difficult, will make you strong, in this case, strong in the Lord.

Bishop Anthony B. Taylor delivered this homily for the Catholic Charities Summer Institute July 12.

Teens put their social teachings boots on the ground

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |





C2SI leader Josh Salman, campus minister at Mount St. Mary Academy in Little Rock, gives a talk to youth participants July 10. (Collin Gallimore photo)



Seminarians Sam Stengel (left) of Paris and Jackson Nichols (right) of Pocahontas lead a discussion with their small group July 11. (Collin Gallimore photo)



C2SI participants distribute food during a cookout at Jericho Way in Little Rock July 11. (Collin Gallimore photo)



C2SI participants listen to the journey of Jericho Way clients during a cookout July 11. (Collin Gallimore photo)



Angel Martinez of St. James Church in Searcy describes his experiences with his small group after the cookout at Jericho Way July 11. (Collin Gallimore photo)



Mora Boyd of St. Boniface Church in Fort Smith (left), Zach Ellis of Our Lady of the Holy Souls in Little Rock and Parker Vail of Immaculate Conception Church in North Little Rock prepare to lead the C2SI participants in prayer on July 11. (Collin Gallimore photo)

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Catholic teens spent a week in July learning what the Catholic Church teaches about social issues.

C2SI (Catholic Charities Summer Institute) is a weeklong retreat held at St. John Center in Little Rock to help youth from incoming freshmen to just-graduated seniors better understand the Catholic view of some hot-button issues. The teens also have opportunities throughout the week to serve at work sites in the Little Rock area.

Diocesan youth ministry director Liz Tingquist said she was happy C2SI was organized July 10-14 for the first time since 2019.

"Your parents are the first teachers of the faith as they should be," Tingquist said. "But to the kids, I said, 'We're going to challenge you this week to start developing your own sense of social morality. And it may get you uncomfortable, or it may be opposed to the views of your parents. This is an opportunity at your age to start developing your own sense of what's right when it comes to these social justice issues. So we're going to have some discussions, and it's okay for you guys to disagree. But it's going to be civil, and we're going to talk about it.'"

One of the work sites this year was Jericho Way Day Resource Center. In addition to hosting a cookout, C2SI youth also cleaned the building.

"Jericho Way is always a great work site," Tingquist said. "That was hard work. The kids deep-cleaned that place. They cleaned commodes and showers that hadn't been cleaned in a long time. They shampooed carpets, and we did a lot of stuff there. It really gets young people working who've never done anything like that before, and they all had great attitudes."

Volunteering at Jericho Way was meaningful to rising senior Parker Vail, a parishioner of Immaculate Conception Church in North Little Rock.

"Going into C2SI, I just expected that we were going to be doing some boring service work and that the talks would be boring too," he said. "My expectations changed immediately on Tuesday when we went to Jericho Way. ... It really showed me that these people that are so looked down upon in our society are still people. And what especially surprised me was how positive all the people there were despite what they're all going through."

C2SI shifts its attention each year. This year, the program centered on food and housing poverty and how they're connected, as well as Catholic civil discourse.

Teens participated in a housing simulation where each student was assigned a different character and had to visit stations related to Section 8 housing, an apartment building, public housing and a women's shelter to find a home.

"People were getting frustrated," Tingquist said. "The kids said they felt like they were their characters and were getting desperate. Nobody explains how you get housing. The key is, if you want public housing, you have to get a voucher from Section 8 first. Well, nobody knew that so nobody went to Section 8 until almost the last day and then the lines were so long, and they couldn't get served. So I think that was a very good exercise for them to get through, and we had a great conversation afterward."

C2SI is different from other ministries the youth office offers, such as Search and the State Youth Convention.

"C2SI is focused on giving young people experiences they probably haven't had before, like going into homeless camps, meeting people, going to areas where there's a lot of immigrants and visiting with them," Tingquist said. "It's a very serious week, so it's important that only people who want to come actually come."

C2SI participants said the week touched their lives in a personal way.

"The main thing I learned from the week was that the people experiencing homelessness are just everyday people like you and me," Vail said. "They have human dignity and deserve to be treated well."

Advice to teens: Be courageous and persevere

written by Bishop Anthony B. Taylor |

When we encounter such situations, it is very important to remember what I told you at dinner Monday night: that it could just as well be us — "but for the grace of God, there go I. " There are a lot of people in our world who are facing problems that they find to be simply overwhelming.

Hopefully this experience has served to put you in their shoes, even if only for a couple of days. So if you are in their shoes, what are the ways that you can draw on your faith to deal effectively with problems that seem overwhelming and look like they're only going to get worse?

In today's Gospel Jesus says to do three things:

- keep your eyes open,
- be courageous and

- persevere.

And he promises to help us through these troubles. Here Jesus is speaking about the persecution of believers by the government and betrayal by their own family members, but what he says applies to other troubles as well. He says, "I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be as shrewd as serpents and simple as doves . . . and do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say. For it will not be you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. "

But then as now, believers who keep their eyes open, act courageously and persevere will prevail. Jesus says elsewhere: "By your perseverance you will save your lives. "

And what is true on the cosmic level about persevering despite all the adversities we might face in the larger world as the price of faithfulness to the Lord is true also on the personal level about us persevering despite all the personal adversities we must face while still in this life. And this applies just as much to the everyday problems that you and I face as it does to the overwhelming adversities that sometimes lead to homelessness and the other social problems you have been learning about this week.

- Keep your eyes open to see what's really going on. Don't allow yourself to be deceived by outside appearances.

Our Gospel says we should be as "shrewd as serpents and as simple as doves. " In other words, don't turn a blind eye to problems that if you don't deal with them now are only going to get worse.

- Be courageous about how you confront these problems. When Jesus says to be "shrewd as serpents" he is drawing on peoples' belief that snakes will let you cut off their tail, so long as they can keep their head intact and thereby survive.

I don't think it works that way, but that was the image: be courageous enough to be willing to suffer quite a bit if that is what it's going to take to deal with the problems effectively.

- Persevere and, thereby, share in Jesus' victory. In our Gospel, that means prevailing over persecutors.

In our own lives, that means not giving up when the struggle becomes hard, but rather simply doing our best and then placing our trust in the Lord who will do the rest.

Jesus' words in today's Gospel are as much for you and me as they were for the disciples 2,000 years ago: "I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be as shrewd as serpents and simple as doves . . . and do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say ... For it will not be you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. "

And "by your perseverance you will save your lives" — and I might add, the lives of others as well.

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Catholic Charities Summer Institute marks 10 years of learning, service

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Refugee simulation challenges teens at Catholic Charities Summer Institute