

Reflection on Youth Experience at Congress X From IN A WORD October 2007 edition

They were young and you could not miss them. From all parts of the country they came full of joy and a spirit of faith. High school and young adults who were very much a part of the Tenth National Black Catholic Congress.

The Congress planners wanted to give special attention to young African American Catholics. After all...aren't they a part of the Catholic Church? They are indeed our future and if there is to be a gathering of African American Catholics every 5 years then why not involve our youth?

The Congress office called on the talented Vincent Guider of Chicago, Illinois. He in turn organized a planning committee of young people from throughout the country. The results were nothing short of fantastic. Not only did the young people come but they participated with song, dance, and prayer.

The youth sessions were held apart from the larger group in the Convention Center. The youth would join the adults for Mass, adoration services, and reconciliation.

All was expertly set up by Vince and his young associates to provide variety and opportunities for all to express themselves freely. There were large gatherings called "mega sessions" and many workshops which spoke to the youthful spirit present at Congress.

Three "mega sessions" set the stage for the young Catholics to feel the love of Christ and the community.

In the first mega session young African American Catholic youth were issued a mandate to be sensitive and loving toward brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ both far and near. Special focus was set on respect for elders, solidarity with people in afflicted African nations and respect for all Congress attendees.

The second session emphasized the sacrament of confirmation. Youth heard that Confirmation is more than a one time ceremony...it is a lifestyle. The young people were challenged in the assembly to rely upon the Holy Spirit in the daily endeavor to live as true disciples of Jesus Christ.

The last "mega session" emphasized reconciliation. With stories, issues, testimonies, media, ritual and song the youthful assembly was guided to understand the evil nature of sin, its disruptive effects on humanity and God's endless mercy despite what we do. The session ended with the Sacrament of reconciliation.

There were smaller meetings that addressed all the difficulties of being young.

There were even workshops for youth adult leaders. One session that received national attention in the news releases was a presentation by Christopher Boudy on how to use communication media as a tool to evangelization.

There was a session that spoke to athletes and how sport can play in one's education, personal development and Christian witness to others. There were sessions on music and dance. A lively session challenged youth as to what they want to do with their lives.

There was a special assembly for females and one for males. Young women were urged to see themselves as daughters of the King and to live their lives in a spiritual way. Young men were challenged to look at what makes a real man.

At the final workshop the young people shared their dreams for the future and the Church.

The Congress dedication to youth went beyond just saying the old phrase “the youth are our future.” The Congress movement is actively promoting programs that will help our youth in the day to day struggles of their lives.

The Congress days gave the young not only song and spirit but brought them together to experience how much alike they are despite geographical differences. The young people realized in Buffalo that there are many others like them who want support and strength in facing life’s problem. They found that there was no laughing about making God the center of their lives. They found that it was okay to stand up and pray.

Nothing brought this out more dramatically than in a skit the young people presented during the reconciliation session. Here they shared their weaknesses. One girl in particular gave a poignant dramatization of a young person contemplating suicide. Her virtuoso portrayal of a young person struggling with whether or not to end her life spoke loudly to all present. Her salvation in the end was realizing that God was there at her side and that to end her life was not the answer.

Another powerful witness was given by a young woman and young adult male who stood up before the entire assembly to share their love for the Eucharist. At the adoration service these two moved all present with their unabashed love of God and their joy in the Eucharist.

To their credit Congress planners included plenty of time for the younger generation to pray and yes even meditate. It was an awesome sight to see a whole room of energetic talented youngsters deep in silence and prayer.

Young people want to experience God and the Congress wisely saw that this happened during the Congress days. So it was the sessions were not without substance. The team assembled by Guider did not bring the young together to entertain. No, all the assemblies dealt with difficult issues and gave to the young people tools to deal with their travails. The biggest tool was their love of God and realizing that God was there for them. Congress challenged them to bring that gift out in their local Churches.

Yes, the youth are the future of our Catholic Church. For the first time in recent Congress assemblies the youth experience was not an “add on” or afterthought. It was well planned and organized and most importantly brought a sense of community to young from diverse parts of the country.

**Love of God was everywhere in the youth sessions. Would that more would be able to feel that spirit and know that
....talking about God is okay.
....to pray is okay.**

Teens and young adults learned a valuable lesson...the Holy Spirit is alive and in their hands.