

THE YOUTH OF THE CHURCH

“You’re as young as you feel.” We often respond with that phrase after we hear the age of someone that is up in years. Another response could be, “You’re as young as you act.” In that sense, the Church is called to be forever young. During the Mass at the National Shrine in Washington, D.C., prior to the March for Life, Cardinal William Keeler, Archbishop of Baltimore, quoted our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, as saying that “The Church is alive and young.”

Those of you who have been to the National Shrine Basilica of the Immaculate Conception on one of our diocesan pilgrimages know that it is a very large church. You will also remember that there are a good many chapels along the side aisles, chapels that can accommodate groups of significant size. As you will recall, there is a crypt church below the basilica itself. The sanctuary is, also, grand. In other words, the National Shrine is a big place.

What impressed me was not so much that all of that space was filled with people on the 22nd of January. I was encouraged and edified to see that the great majority of them were young. As I processed in and out before and after the Mass with hundreds of other bishops, priests, and deacons, I passed through a multitude of youth standing in every nook and cranny. I managed to spot two of our seminarians, whereupon I reached over to embrace them. (The procession could wait.)

More important than the fact that such a large number of our young people were there was the reason why they were there. They came to pray with the Church of this nation that we, as a nation, might recognize the great gift from God that life is.

During this past week, we celebrated *Catholic Schools Week*. There have been many fine activities in all of our schools, pointing to the excellence of the education that we provide. Every year, I celebrate Mass in each of our diocesan high schools, as well as parish grade schools when I am invited. In addition, each year, I meet with about 40 students from our high schools for a discussion. As my part in celebrating *Catholic Schools Week*, I have three students and their principal from each of our high schools at my residence for lunch.

Then, there are the several annual youth gatherings within our Diocesan Church that draw hundreds. I make it an effort to spend a few hours with them, including the celebration of the Mass. The youth of the parish faith communities within the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown are a precious gift to us. Parents and educators have my commendation and gratitude for that.

From all of the above, we can see the youthfulness of the Church. While educators (including parents) can often wonder what impact they are having, I can say that I firmly believe that someone is doing something right.

We older types are prone to worry about the future of the Church. It is in good hands, - God’s hands. From what I can tell, He has some very good material with which to work. It could very well be more responsive to him than we have been. The Church continues to be young.