

## CENTERPIECE

## A weekend focused on Christ

## Young people gather for the first Youth 2000 retreat in Madison

By Kat Wagner  
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## What is Youth 2000?

Youth 2000 is an "international spiritual initiative" born out of Pope John Paul II's 1989 call for a "Decade of Evangelization." It seeks to bring youth closer to God through the celebration of Mass and Adoration of the Eucharist.

Started by Englishman Ernest Williams while in his 20s, the initiative has spread to countries around the world, including the United States, and has continued past its year-2000 goal.

The retreat in Madison featured 40 hours of Eucharistic Adoration, Mass, talks by priests, testimonies by young people, and small group discussions. It was led by the communities of the Franciscan Friars of Renewal and the Franciscan Sisters of Renewal, with talks by priests of the Community of St. John.

[www.youth2000usa.org](http://www.youth2000usa.org)

## What is the Community of Franciscan Friars/Sisters of Renewal?

The Community of Franciscan Friars of Renewal (CFR) and the Community Franciscan Sisters of Renewal are two worldwide communities of religious, both based in the Bronx, New York.

Relatively new congregations (founded in 1987 and 1988, respectively), they follow the Capuchin tradition. The Friars' habits are grey robes with hoods, a belt, and sandals, and the Sisters wear grey robes, a belt, sandals, and a black veil. Friars commonly wear beards. Some of the most well-known Franciscan Friars of Renewal are Fr. Stan Fortuna (musician) and Fr. Benedict Groeschel (author and EWTN talk show host).

The communities are very involved with Youth 2000 retreats.

[www.franciscanfriars.com](http://www.franciscanfriars.com)  
[www.franciscansisterscf.com](http://www.franciscansisterscf.com)

## What is the Community of St. John?

The Community of St. John was founded in France in 1975 and now is established in more than 22 countries worldwide. The community focuses on a fully evangelical life of Adoration and closeness to Mary. Through the community's ministry "Children of Hope," they seek to lead young people to a greater devotion to the Eucharist.

[www.stjean.com](http://www.stjean.com)  
[www.childrenofhope.org](http://www.childrenofhope.org)

MADISON — "Look at that," said a chaperone at the Youth 2000 Retreat, pointing to one of her students during a praise and worship song. "He said he doesn't do 'hand gestures' — look who's doing 'hand gestures.'"

The hand motions and the clapping — mixed as they were for some with a bit of self-consciousness — were just one of the signs that this combination of sacraments, catechism, music, and the Eucharist was working to reach these young people. Testimonies by youth attendees at the close of the retreat and e-mail afterward also revealed how powerful the experience was for many who had come unsure of or uninterested in what the weekend event had to offer.

The Youth 2000 retreat, held at the Bishop O'Connor Center in Madison March 20 to 22, brought together approximately 500 youth, volunteers, and chaperones from around the diocese for a weekend of Eucharistic Adoration, Mass, Reconciliation, talks from priests and testimonies from attendees, and small group discussions.

It blended the more "traditional" aspects of Catholic life — Mass, Eucharistic Adoration, Reconciliation, the Crowning of Mary, the Rosary, and the Chaplet of Divine Mercy — with the more modern music, hand motions, and practical talks. This combination, with a strong focus on the presence of Christ through the Eucharist, helped make

the underlying message more accessible to youth.

"When they see that it's genuine and it's true, that's good — it's attractive," said Br. Maximilian Stelmachowski, a Franciscan Friar of the Renewal and emcee for the retreat. "That's not something we can fabricate. It just is. And those things are just naturally — I might even say 'supernaturally' — attractive to young people. . . and to not-so-young people."

"I think that because it's at the heart

of who we are as human beings: that if the Catholic faith is true, which we believe it is, and that God made us for himself and has given us the Church to help us to know him and to live our faith on earth — if it's really the truth, it resonates deep within you," said Sr. Maria Teresa Hellberg, a Franciscan Sister of the Renewal.

"That's what the sacraments are — bringing us closer to Jesus on earth," she said. "When you introduce young people to the basic fundamentals of our faith, like the Eucharist . . . he resonates deep within them — because we were made for that." It's the Holy Spirit that does the work, Sister Maria Teresa said.

"It's nothing we're doing," she said. "We might be up there clapping and singing — we're happy to be with Jesus, too. But it's him. It's giving people an opportunity to sit before Jesus, and he does everything."

The challenge of the weekend, Brother Maximilian said, is to go deeper into one's faith. "But also it's the challenge to open up in a way that maybe they wouldn't at Mass or a way that's not 'normal.' It's the challenge to let God do something new that they haven't experienced yet," he said.

"It's amazing . . . if somebody just comes here and folds their arms and they sit there and expect something to happen, it won't . . . I mean, maybe it can, certainly he can, but when they open up the doors and cooperate, that's God's grace," he said.

"What I've seen, time and time again at these retreats, is they come to an intimate encounter with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and time and time again they realize 'God loves me, God cares about me, he wants to be involved in my life personally,'" said Sr. Catherine Holum, a Franciscan Sister of the Renewal. "They come away with that, especially with the Eucharistic healing procession on Saturday night. It's the pinnacle of the weekend. They discover that God loves me and wants to be the involved with my life — he will be the one to bring me love, peace, and joy."

"On Sunday, no one wants to go home," she said. "They've formed this bond with other young people who are getting excited about their faith and they don't want to leave Jesus and the beautiful experience they had with Jesus over the weekend."

The youth participants responded positively to the experience, both in testimonies on Sunday at the close of the retreat and in e-mail to the diocesan Office of Evangelization and Catechesis, which organized the Madison event. Many had said they came unsure of what to expect — and for some, not wanting to be there — but left wanting more.

"The Youth 2000 retreat had a very welcoming and exciting atmosphere and because



The "burning bush" provided a centerpiece for the weekend-long focus on Eucharistic Adoration. (Catholic Herald photos/Kat Wagner)

of this I opened up really easily," said Morgan, a participant from Jefferson, in an e-mail message. "I was just telling my youth minister Tiffany Topel that I wanted to come back! I miss having Mass every day and being able to praise our saving Lord all day every day!"

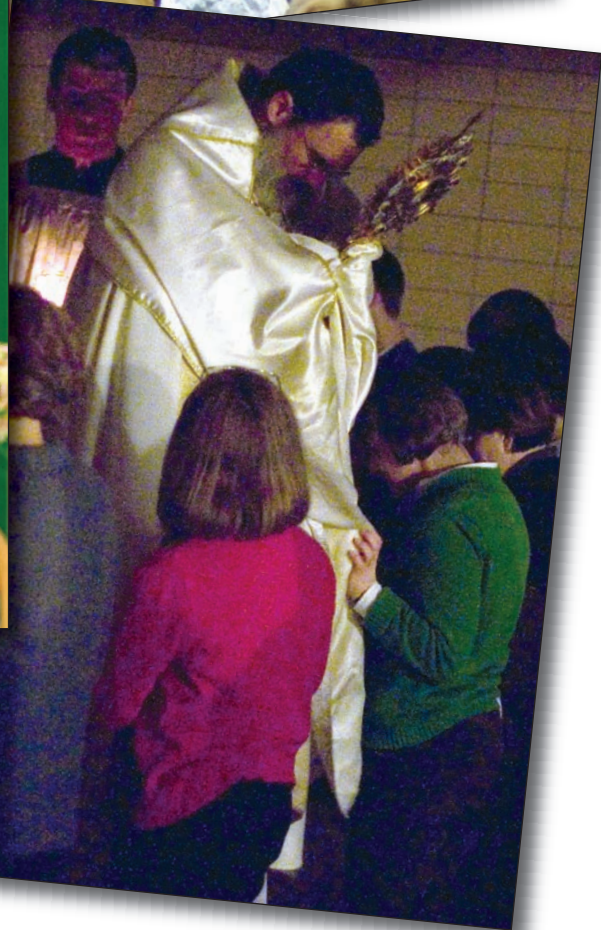
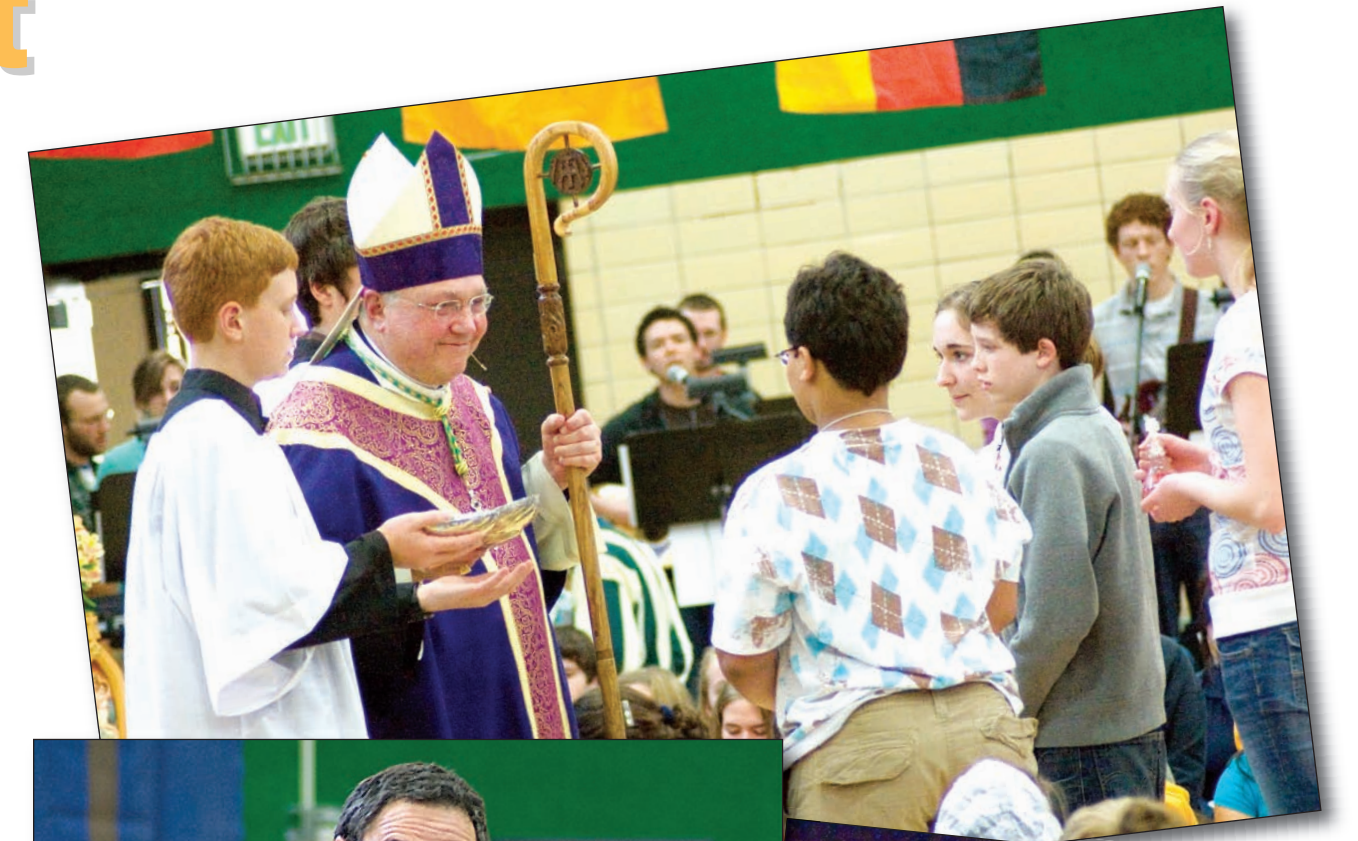
"I really loved Adoration last night," Xavier, a participant from Monona, said during the testimonies on Sunday. "It was about the first time I cried in about eight years. That was really touching."

The retreat also had a positive experience on vocations. Before the participant testimonies, approximately two dozen young men and women stood up to show their interest in pursuing a religious vocation and were blessed. Several said that their decision was solidified during Adoration.

Anna, a self-described "cradle Catholic" for whom religious life had always been an option, said during the testimonies that she hadn't been sure what to expect from the retreat, but that she would leave it up to God.

"Before Adoration, I had gone to the vocations meet, and I asked the Sisters, 'how do you know?' And they laughed at me, and said 'Oh, you know.' That wasn't very fair of them," she said, drawing laughter from the crowd. "But before adoration, they said, 'just think of something you want to ask God.' So I said, 'Okay, God, surprise me.' I wasn't expecting to get a proposal."

"I got a proposal from the Lord, and I've accepted, so I'm going to become a religious Sister," she said. "It's now just a matter of when and where."



From top, left to right:

Bishop Robert C. Morlino receives the Offertory gifts from youth during the Saturday Mass at the Youth 2000 retreat at the Bishop O'Connor Center in Madison March 20 to 22.

Fr. Terry Messer speaks to the youth during one of the many talks — some brief, some longer — during the weekend.

A participant reaches to touch the "cloak of Jesus" during a Eucharistic procession on Saturday night, a highlight of the retreat.

Attendees laugh during Bishop Morlino's homily.

For more photos from the Youth 2000 retreat, go to: [www.madisoncatholicherald.org/images/2009youth2k/](http://www.madisoncatholicherald.org/images/2009youth2k/)