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Teachers Institute speaker praises educators as ‘heroes of the culture’



Jon Leonetti, keynote speaker at the 2012 Teachers Institute in the Cathedral of St. Joseph, talks to over 600 Catholic educators about the Church’s concept of love, which calls on people to lay down their own lives for other people in imitation of Christ. — Photo by Jay Nies

By Jay Nies

Praising them as “heroes of the culture” and “shapers of our kids,” Catholic evangelist Jon Leonetti challenged Catholic educators of the Jefferson City diocese to continue modeling Christ’s love to the people they serve.

“All of us are searching for one thing. No matter who you are, where you come from or what you’ve done in your life, no matter what profession you are, we’re all searching for love,” Mr. Leonetti told an audience of about 600 Catholic school teachers, administrators and staff at the 2012 Diocesan Teachers Institute, Oct. 8 in the Cathedral of St. Joseph.

Students got a free day as the faculties of the diocese’s 37 Catholic grade schools and three Catholic high schools gathered with 20 workshop presenters from all over the United States.

Echoing the Year of Faith called for by Pope Benedict XVI, the institute’s theme was “Catholic schools: Schools you can have faith in.”

“An incredible God we have, Who walked our walk and talked our talk and died our death,” Mr. Leonetti proclaimed in his keynote address. “I’m here to speak to you about how to become passionately Catholic in our lives.”

He emphasized that the love all Catholics are called to exercise is very different from the popular culture’s concept of “love.”

“Our Church teaches us that love is the ultimate sacrifice,” he said, pointing to the crucifix. “Love is literally laying down our lives for another person.”

Human beings will always fall short of this ideal, “but the Church gives us the vision and the goal,” Mr. Leonetti stated. “And it’s a matter of whether we as Catholics, we as Christians, are willing to take that up with our entire lives.”

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“God is good,” says Sr. Bernita Wasinger SSND, reflecting on 60 years in religious life

By Jay Nies

Sister Bernita Wasinger SSND has taught, visited, befriended and ministered to people of all ages during her 60 years in religious life.

She counts every one of them as a blessing. “Each day is a new adventure for me,” she said. “Every day is a new experience. And I’m still learning.”

Sr. Bernita is in her 25th year as pastoral minister at St. Martin parish in St. Martins, where this summer she celebrated her 60th anniversary as a School Sister of Notre Dame.

“I love my profession, I love my life, and above all, God is good,” she said.

Joining her at her Aug. 25 celebration in St. Martin Church were fellow diamond jubilarians Sister Edith Juergensmeyer SSND and Sister Irene Marie Schmitz SSND, both of Loose Creek, and many other School Sisters of Notre Dame.

“We praise and thank God today for Sr. Bernita, a real, live, faith-filled, loyal servant of the Lord, right here in our midst,” said Father Edwin Schmidt, pastor of St. Martin parish, in his homily.

During the Mass, all the sisters renewed their vows, offering themselves totally to God for service of His kingdom and to “live forever,

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Pope proclaims seven new saints, including St. Kateri, St. Marianne

By Cindy Wooden

Vatican City

Proclaiming seven new saints — including St. Kateri Tekakwitha and St. Marianne Cope from North America — Pope Benedict XVI said they are examples to the world of total dedication to Christ and tireless service to others.

In a revised canonization rite Oct. 21, the Pope prayed for guidance that the Church would not “err in a matter of

such importance” as he used his authority to state that the seven are with God in heaven and can intercede for people on earth.

An estimated 80,000 pilgrims from the United States, Canada, the Philippines, Italy, Spain, Germany and Madagascar filled St. Peter’s Square for the canonization of the holy women and men who ministered among their people.

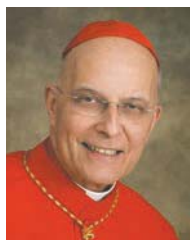
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Cardinal Francis George: The wrong side of history

Chicago’s archbishop writes about the disastrous consequences of governments extending their reach into territory that does not belong to them.

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Mother of mercy, model of religious liberty

About 120 Catholics made a pilgrimage to the National Shrine of Mary, Mother of the Church, to ask Our Lady’s intercession for life and liberty.

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SR. BERNITA

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consecrated to celibacy, Gospel poverty, and apostolic obedience in community," in keeping with the constitution of the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Never alone

Community life was the only life the ninth of Pete and Susanna Wasinger's 11 children knew while growing up.

"People sometimes ask me what it's like coming from such a large family," said Sr. Bernita. "Well, I loved it. I was never alone. We had lots of fun and were kept busy with our chores and homework and school."

Born in central Kansas and baptized in the Cathedral of the Plains, she attended Catholic grade schools in Victoria, Kan.; Linn and St. Louis.

She had two aunts, a cousin and even some teachers who were Sisters of St. Agnes. But her call to religious life came to her while she was a student at Notre Dame High School in St. Louis, staffed by SSNDs.

"I wanted to teach, bring goodness to children and make religion real in my life as well as the lives of those I would be teaching," she said. "I believed I could best do that as a woman religious. I have not regretted that decision. God has been very good to me."

Her mom once revealed to her that she, too, had thought about being a sister, but a priest had told her, "We also need good mothers in the world."

After prayerful deliberation, Sr. Bernita decided to give religious life a try.

"How did I know I wanted to be a nun? I didn't," she said. "But once I got into the novitiate, I said, 'Well, they're watching me. Let's see how long they keep me.' And I must have liked it, because I stayed. And what a blessing it has been for me!"

Her father couldn't bear to say goodbye to her, so her mother, brother and sister drove her to the SSND novitiate in St. Louis. Her brother could hardly believe it the first time he saw her in her simple novice dress that day.

"As hard as it was leaving my good family, I stuck to my decision," she said.

She remembers her time in formation as mostly wonderful, but she occasionally questioned whether she was really doing what God wanted.

"I took the days as they

came, sometimes not so easy and other times just fine," she said. "But I moved forward, on the wings of God's grace. I was happy."

Under the SSND rules for novices at that time, she did not see her family for a year, until the day she professed her vows for the first time.

"My parents and family all came to that," she recalled. "The afternoon of visiting went all too fast. I had missed them dreadfully. I hated to see them leave. But with God's grace, we all made it and looked to a good future."

That day, she received the religious name she would carry for many years: Sister Thomas Ann, in honor of her brother, Thomas, and her mother, Susanna.

"In between"

Sr. Bernita spent her first 10 years in ministry teaching primary-grade children in Catholic schools.

"The kids were good," she said. "I saw accomplishments, and the little ones were so very receptive."

She then moved up to grades 5 through 8.

"That was exciting," she said. "I think I always got along with the children and enjoyed them immensely. It excited me to see them grow and challenge what was presented in teaching and in their lives."

For 29 years, she taught and was principal at five schools in St. Louis and at Sacred Heart School in Poplar Bluff.

One day when she was a principal, she was showing a new student the way to his classroom.

They got stopped six times, and the student asked her, "When do you get your work done?"

"In between," she said.

She then served as associate superintendent of Catholic schools for the Jefferson City diocese from 1985-88.

"Outstanding folks"

After taking a one-year sabbatical to study theology at Gonzaga University in Spokane, she started branching out into parish work, first in St. Louis, then in St. Martins.

"I loved working with people, and with my experience and education, I was prepared for pastoral ministry," she said.



Sister Bernita Wasinger SSND, pastoral minister at St. Martin parish in St. Martins, celebrates her 60th anniversary in religious life with fellow diamond jubilarians Sister Edith Juergensmeyer SSND and Sister Irene Marie Schmitz SSND, both of Loose Creek, at an Aug. 25 Mass in St. Martin Church. — Photo by Jay Nies

Coming to St. Martins brought her into contact with "the best and most outstanding folks," she said. "They are my very dear friends who have supported me every inch of the way. Their encouragement has sustained me."

As pastoral minister, she directs the parish religious education program for kids and teens; prepares high school youth for confirmation; coordinates the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults; instructs altar servers; visits the sick in nursing homes; and takes Holy Communion to nursing home residents and people who are too sick to go to church.

"Bringing people Holy Communion is such a privilege and such a wonderful thing," she said, noting that she occasionally brings Holy Communion to people for the last time before they go to be with God.

She's also involved in the "Why Catholic?" program at St. Martin, taking part in the faith-sharing groups as they learn about the teachings of the Church.

She is a board member of Moreau View Village Senior Housing, seeing it as a way to be involved with the civic community.

Teachable moments

With a lot of help and support from St. Martin parishioners these past 24 years, Sr. Bernita has helped start a 50+ Club for people age 50 and over; started an annual Vacation Bible School and seen it triple in size; and helped organize the parish's popular Lenten soup suppers.

She developed a highly interactive series of "learning Centers"

for students and their families preparing for first reconciliation and First Holy Communion.

For each sacrament, parents and children come together for four evenings to go through 11 learning centers together, taking part in activities that reinforce something important about the sacrament.

She gets great support from the parents on this program, and educators from all over the country have contacted her about adapting this method of sacrament preparation to their own parishes' needs.

She organizes a vocation day for fifth-graders at St. Martin School, a combination of "a lot of crazy games" and some quiet prayer time.

She also built an intergenerational program for confirmation preparation, with parents and sponsors attending about seven meetings with those preparing to be confirmed.

"The parents do a portion of the work with the youth," said Sr. Bernita. "It's wonderful seeing the parents, sponsors and candidates take hold of questions and Scriptures and discuss them. I see parents, sponsors and youth speaking to each other on a different level. Many are very serious about sharing their thoughts with each other."

She likes to be innovative in her instruction techniques, like bringing modeling clay into the sessions for people preparing to enter the Church.

"They're all adults," she said. "Maybe they think I'm little nuts when I have them do that,

but they like it."

She never has to look for volunteers; the people offer to help.

"St. Martin's is a very participating parish under the leadership of an empowering pastor, Father Ed Schmidt," she said.

No strangers

At home, Sr. Bernita enjoys reading books and trying to keep the rabbits and squirrels out of her garden and flowerbed.

She often turns to the Gospel of St. John for inspiration in meditation and prayer.

She believes laughing frequently and smiling a lot make life brighter, friendlier and really enjoyable.

"Be happy," she said. "Be the first to say 'hello.' Otherwise, you might miss getting to know someone wonderful. There are no strangers that way."

She is grateful for God's love and for her family, through which she first experienced it and became aware of it.

"God blessed me with a large family," she said, "and I miss deeply those who have returned to God for eternity. And they still help me out now."

She also gives thanks for being healthy enough to work full-time at age 79, and for all the people God has blessed her with throughout her time as a sister.

"I'm almost 80 years into this life," she said. "I've concluded that I'll spend more time in prayer this year and slow down a little on my other activities. I can't let God sit and wait for me because I'm busy. Beyond that, I'm listening to see what God is trying to say to me."

She asks for prayers that she will always have a forgiving heart, contemplate God more deeply and live with joy and gratitude.

She is convinced that God is still calling young women to consecrated religious life in the Church.

She said religious life requires courage because it means living and approaching many things differently from what is considered mainstream.

"Religious life is not a matter of feeling worthy or unworthy," she said. "God loves us as we are. He is very active in all that we do each minute of the day. That is what makes a person worthy."