

Conquest youth communicate their message across the diocese

More than 20 middle school students at St. Mary in Oak Ridge have joined together on a common mission of faith, with a goal of spreading their work to other Diocese of Knoxville schools.

Part of the goal of St. Mary's Conquest group was realized recently when it gave a presentation to Bishop Richard F. Stika called "United in Prayer: Harnessing the Power!"

Now, the mission-minded boys in fifth through eighth grades who are led by young men in high school want other diocesan students to experience Conquest.

Conquest is a parish group that incorporates students in the school and children who attend public school and are homeschooled.

"This program has been an incredible joining of all pieces of our parish. With the school and our director of religious education helping me to communicate, we have been able to take the high school men that I have gotten to know over the last few years and implement this program to help them be the most effective Catholics in the most fun way," said Margaret Merrill, who heads St. Mary's youth ministry.

"Men leading men is an incredible way for young boys to learn virtue and express themselves as only men can do. With the help of male adults, the high school boys began to brainstorm about what is their heart's greatest desires in living their Catholic faith," Mrs. Merrill added.



Planning for Conquest: Bishop Richard F. Stika meets with boys from St. Mary Parish in Oak Ridge who are participating in the Conquest program. High school boys in the program lead middle school boys in faith formation activities geared to be instructional and fun. Several men in the parish are advisers for the program.

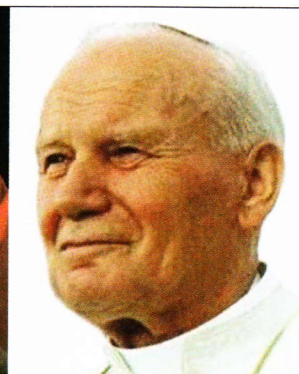
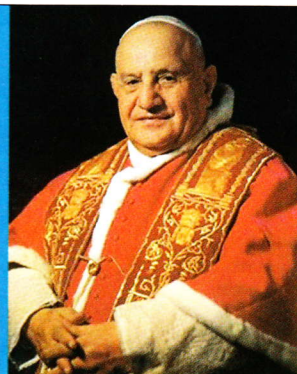
She said the young men in high school asked how they can best lead the middle school boys in a project that not only can be fruitful for the parish but also fruitful for the diocese, and possibly go beyond and encourage others in the diocese to allow youth to get involved.

"They have the energy to truly transform the world. We, as adults, need to only kindle the fire that is already there and then watch what happens. Spending a lunch with our bishop and seeing their faces when they walked out was priceless. Now the work begins. As these young men start this new journey they will be growing in their faith as they inspire others and help

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them grow closer to Christ," Mrs. Merrill said.

When the St. Mary Middle School students met with Bishop Stika in October, they were unified in their message, even wearing T-shirts promoting their cause. Half of them wore orange shirts with "Conquest" in bold letters on the front and "Born for adventure, Called to serve" on the back. The other half wore yellow shirts that read "Conquest" on the front and "The road to adventure starts here" on the back.

In their presentation, they informed Bishop Stika that their mission is to unite the entire diocese in prayer, and, by doing so, increase the faith of Catholics and impact the world through a coordinated, diocesan-wide time of prayer.

Additional goals for the project are to prepare people in the diocese for Holy Week, emphasize the power of prayer, create stronger friendships with deep roots in our faith and to create a lasting tradition.

Dave Duhamel, a St. Mary's parishioner and a leader in the parish's Knights of Columbus, has been working with the Conquest group for two years as an adult adviser.

"Traditional youth groups are focused on high school groups. We wanted to broaden that to middle school students," Duhamel said. "It's a national program that has centralized materials that we use. We have been involved with it for about three years."

The Conquest group wants to reach all 47 parishes and four missions in the diocese, targeting young men and women. Tools to reach the youth are through social media, incorporating Facebook and YouTube, as well as the diocesan website and traditional communication through flyers mailed to parishioners and letters to parishes.

Bishop Stika said he wants to work with the Conquest youth to get their message out across the diocese.

"I think your idea is a great idea," Bishop Stika said. "I think it's a wonderful program because it's doable, especially as the diocese is preparing for Holy Week."

Bishop Stika compared the Conquest group's goals to the diocese's recent Eucharistic Congress and 25th anniversary celebration. He said both were based on a single, achievable concept.

"I think we have to work together to do this," the bishop said. "We'll continue to get organized and make some goals and see what we can get accomplished."

Duhamel said St. Mary's Conquest group has received good response from boys at the parish, especially with high school youth leading the middle school group.

"What we're trying to do is that balancing between fun and religion and trying to instill values using the high school boys as their leaders," he said.

He said the adult advisers' roles are to mentor the high school youth, assisting them in planning their activities and planning each meeting.

"The high school boys are leading the middle school boys, so that's the focus of the program — develop these young high school men into being leaders and bringing along the middle-schoolers. We're showing the homeschoolers, St. Mary School students and the public school students what Conquest is about and bringing them together as a community," Duhamel said.

Patrick Daigle, 10, a fifth-grader who is homeschooled and who has just joined Conquest through St. Mary, said he's excited to be a part of the group.

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"It's a lot of fun. I'm one of the new kids this year. Conquest is a group of roughly 20 kids led mostly by graduates of St. Mary. We do a lot of projects, and usually after the meetings we have a game of dodge ball. It's really fun."

Ethan Robinson, a seventh-grader at St. Mary School, has been in Conquest since its inception two years ago. He shares the opinion of fellow St. Mary student Paul Carter, who is an eighth-grader, that Conquest is fun.

They are looking forward to seeing the group accomplish its goals as they grow closer to Christ.

Osvaldo Contreras, a sixth-grader at Robertsville Middle School in Oak Ridge who is in his first year in Conquest, said he is learning a lot about Catholicism through the group, as well as having fun.

"We get to hang out with friends, we get to play games, we get to learn about Jesus, and we learn prayers," he said.

Sam Held, a 10th-grader who is working with the Conquest middle school students, has been mentoring for two years.

Sam, who is homeschooled, said the work is challenging and fun. "They're fun and they have a lot of energy," he said. "It is challenging. I work with the fifth- and sixth-graders, and I have younger brothers, so I have some experience with it."

"They're excited to be out of school and into this fun part where it's not sitting with some of the teachers; it's talking to other high school boys about it. Then the kids from public school hear about it and come into it, so I think they're excited to be here. It's different from a school setting while they're still learning," Sam noted.



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