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Next step: action

Students learn that poverty isn't a good Christian value

Dennis Sadowski, Editor

CLEVELAND- Feeding the hungry has gotten Kevin Koncilja thinking.

The St. Ignatius High School senior thinks about the people he has served every week for the last three years at the community meal hosted by St. Patrick Church on the city's Near West Side, just a few blocks from his school.

Their situation, their needs and their lives are on his mind frequently. He thinks about why they are at the meal week after week, month after month, year after year.

"I've always wanted to be involved with feeding the hungry and sharing time with them," said Koncilja, a senior.

"I've learned a lot about people. I'm getting rid of my stereotypes for them. It's helped me really connect with people," he said.

As he prepares to enter college in the fall, Koncilja is thinking about the next step in his life. It's not only the education he's concerned about, but about helping change the world's view of poor people. He thinks about ways to "follow in the steps of Jesus rather than do something for self gratification."

Koncilja was assisting Father Bob Begin, administrator of St. Colman Church, Cleveland, and a staff member of the Commission on Catholic Community Action, during the March 9 Poverty Summit at St. Ignatius High School sponsored by Catholic Students for Peace and Justice. Father Begin was talking about the cycle of unemployment many poor people face to small groups of teen-age students attending the summit.

The summit brought together 950 students from 21 diocesan high schools to learn about poverty, its causes and its varied impact on large segments of the Northeast Ohio community.

Having the summit in Cleveland allowed students a brief glimpse of the deep poverty afflicting the city. Students and other summit participants had the chance following the opening Mass celebrated by Bishop Richard G. Lennon at St. Patrick Church on Bridge Avenue to walk through a few blocks of the Near West Side, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the nation's poorest big city.

In 2005, the latest year statistics are available, 32 percent of Cleveland residents and nearly 50 percent of the city's children lived in poverty, the U.S. Census Bureau reports.

The summit focused on three broad topics: homelessness, worker rights and education. Students heard from nearly 50 advocates of the poor as well as poor people themselves in workshops like the one Father Begin led. Workshop leaders addressed a particular need in each area such as worker training needs, roadblocks to finding affordable housing, quality of public education, racism, lack of access to health care and hunger.

Bishop Pilla's dream

It was Bishop Anthony M. Pilla who set the tone for the day, with a rousing keynote address that challenged students not only to be aware of the difficulties poverty inflicts on people but to take steps to change the world.

“Our commitment to those in greatest need is not just a nice feeling,” Bishop Pilla said. “This isn’t just we want to be nice. This isn’t just humanitarianism.

“You cannot be Catholic and not be concerned about those in need. You cannot celebrate Mass and the Eucharist without an essential concern for the poor. The book of Genesis teaches us that every person is made in God’s image and likeness and endowed with inalienable dignity. ... As believers we are called to treat all people with respect, with compassion and with justice.”

It will take involvement in the political process to change social policy toward poor people, Bishop Pilla said while encouraging students to join the public debate over budget priorities.

The idea for a high school summit focusing on poverty was advanced by Bishop Pilla two years ago during a meeting with faculty advisors to CSPJ. The organization, started at a handful of high schools in 2002, had yet to reach into each of the diocese’s 22 high schools.

While the summit took two years to come together, planners made sure to broaden CSPJ’s outreach. The result found nearly 1,000 young people talking about poverty for a day and coming away wondering what they could do not only to serve the poor but to advocate for social change.

Ideas abound

After a series of 20-minute sessions, students returned to their school groups to discuss what they learned from the day. Cuyahoga Falls Walsh Jesuit High School’s contingent of 35 students seemed to reflect a deeper understanding of the depth of poverty in Northeast Ohio.

Jesuit Father Jim King looked out at the students crammed into a small math classroom, asking what anyone wanted to share. One-by-one hands went up.

Junior Laura Illig offered that it seems that many people who are trying to get back on their feet seem to have roadblocks placed in front of them by government policies. She cited the example of a single mother whose low-wage income was too high to receive welfare, but yet could not afford health insurance.

“Our world is imperfect,” Illig said later. “There are some things that can be better. There’s a way to do that. Why not?”

Another student wondered about the practices of temp agencies that deducted a high percentage of fees from the paychecks of minimum wage workers, leaving them with \$3 to \$4 per hour on average in take home pay. “They (workers) were really exploited by the agencies,” he said.

A third student said he didn’t realize the Salvation Army shelter for homeless men at 2100 Lakeside Ave., Cleveland, was not only the largest in Ohio but the entire Midwest.

Students also offered ideas on how to improve the situations of poor people. One of the suggestions, which seemed to reverberate strongly through the Walsh Jesuit contingent, was for the school to hire a hard-to-employ person to work in maintenance. By doing so, a person could begin to learn skills that would be more attractive to other employers.

It was those kinds of reactions that Notre Dame Sister Kathleen Ryan, who staffs CSJP for the Commission on Catholic Community Action, and other summit organizers were hoping would come out of the day.

“We have been getting a great response,” Sister Ryan said. “It was a great day for the students.”

CSJP plans to send representatives to the Catholic Conference of Ohio Legislative Advocacy Day April 25 at the Statehouse in Columbus to begin to influence public policy when it comes to the poor

2) Article Featured in Cleveland Plain Dealer (6 Mar 2007)

1,000 students gathering Friday to discuss poverty

by Ellen Kleinerman

Cleveland Plain Dealer, Tuesday, March 06, 2007

More than 1,000 Northeast Ohio high school students will gather on Friday to talk about poverty.

The first Catholic Schools for Peace and Justice summit aims to raise awareness among youth and "dispel myths that often blame victims," said Sister Kathleen Ryan of the Commission on Catholic Community Action.

Students from 21 Catholic high schools in Northeast Ohio will meet at St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland for the day-long event to learn about the working poor, migrant workers, workers' rights, the homeless, health care and more.

"It's opening students' eyes to how the poor are surviving," Ryan said, "but it's ultimately a call to action."

Highlights of the summit include viewing "Faces of Poverty in Northeast Ohio," a video made by students who spent time getting to know people who live in Cleveland's poor neighborhoods. The Rev. Anthony Pilla, retired bishop of the Cleveland diocese, will be the keynote speaker.

The summit is Pilla's dream, said teacher Augie Pacetti of Padua Franciscan High School, who organized the event with Ryan and St. Ignatius teacher Tim Evans.

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3) Story on National Public Radio affiliate WKSU (8 Mar 2007)

Area High Schoolers Meeting to Find Ways to Reduce Poverty

by Kevin Niedermier

WKSU, Thursday, March 8, 2007

Hundreds of Northeast Ohio high school students will get together tomorrow to discuss ways they can help reduce poverty in the region. The summit was organized the group "Catholic Schools for Peace and Justice." The goal, according to one of the organizers, is moving beyond charity in helping the poor.

Hear an audio version of this news story at: [link](#)

4) Article Featured in Akron Beacon Journal (9 Mar 2007)

Catholic students meet to discuss Cleveland poverty

by M.R. Kropko, Associated Press
Akron Beacon Journal, March 9, 2007

CLEVELAND - With a determination to do something to help alleviate poverty in the city rated as the nation's most impoverished, more than 900 high school students from throughout the Cleveland Roman Catholic Diocese met Friday to pray and talk about strategy.

The first-time poverty summit was organized by Catholic Schools for Peace and Justice, a social action group formed in 2002 by educators at high schools and colleges within the diocese of about 800,000 Catholics.

"We're just hoping that maybe today we can start something good," said 18-year-old St. Ignatius student Joe Tomin.

"My hope is to raise awareness," said Bridget Kent, 16, a Notre Dame-Cathedral Latin student. "I think kids can do a lot of things. We have clubs in our schools. We get involved in soup kitchens and food drives."

Two years ago, Bishop Anthony Pilla suggested that the new schools' social action group consider involving diocese high school students in a poverty summit. Pilla retired last year and was replaced by Richard Lennon, who had been auxiliary bishop of the Boston Archdiocese. Pilla, who now teaches at a seminary, and Lennon attended the summit. Of the 22 high schools in the diocese, 21 sent students.

Sister Kathleen Ryan, one of the event's organizers, said speakers in classroom sessions were asked to include people who could give firsthand experiences. Students met, among others, residents of a homeless shelter.

She said the school's summit in Cleveland will be discussed at the April convention of the National Catholic Educational Association in Baltimore.

On Aug. 29, Cleveland was ranked as the nation's poorest big city by the U.S. Census Bureau for the second time in three years. Detroit held the dubious distinction until the government's American Community Survey research put Cleveland back in the top rank with 32.4 percent of its approximately 450,000 people living below the poverty level.

Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson's response then was that Cleveland's rate of poverty has been among the highest in the United States for many years and that the city needs to put together an appropriate anti-poverty plan.

Pilla said each school in the diocese tries to teach about social issues, such as poverty, within a religious context.

"But we have never really brought them all together like this," Pilla said. "Young people tend to be very idealistic and very dynamic, but they need to know it's going to take a lot of hard work. Having a lot of good will is only a part of it. They need to understand the complexities."

5) Story on Cleveland FOX 8 (9 Mar 2007)

Catholic students meet to discuss Cleveland poverty

FOX 8 Cleveland, March 9, 2007

CLEVELAND About 900 Catholic high school students met in Cleveland today to talk about how to alleviate poverty in the city rated as the nation's most impoverished.

The first-time poverty summit was organized by Catholic Schools for Peace and Justice, a social action group.

Sixteen-year-old Bridget Kent says it's time to raise awareness about the issue.

Last August, Cleveland was ranked as the nation's poorest big city by the U-S Census Bureau for the second time in three years.

Detroit held the dubious distinction until the government's American Community Survey research put Cleveland back in the top rank with 32 percent of its people living below the poverty level.

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