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PHOTO LINK

Bringing Light to the Darkness

Life-changing youth conference comes to Chicagoland June 1

CREST HILL, Ill.—Long before crews assemble multi-stage summer events popular among teens—like Lollapalooza and Riot Fest—hard-working event organizers will be setting up a concert of their own a few miles west of the lakefront, in suburban Romeoville. The tech gear, lighting, and sound equipment set up at Lewis University on June 1 will also crank out concert-level decibels, but this event has a higher calling. The Diocese of Joliet will offer teens a life-changing experience—and it doesn't require elusive wristbands or provocative outfits.

On June 1, the diocese is hosting its first-annual Joliet Youth Day for 1,000 area teens. The event is a local version of a Steubenville Youth Conference, says Justin Reyes, director of catechesis and evangelization at the diocese.

The popular Steubenville Youth Conferences, an outreach of Franciscan University of Steubenville, are a series of 15 events across North America that help teens encounter the love of Christ each summer.

"It's an opportunity for high school teens to encounter Christ through dynamic talks and engaging speakers, through Eucharistic Adoration and Confession, through Mass, fellowship, games and activities," says Reyes. "We're bringing a Steubenville Youth Conference to our diocese locally so that our parishes don't have to travel to other places—they can find one here."

All rising 8th graders (current 7th graders) through rising freshmen in college (current high school seniors) are welcome to attend. Joliet Youth Day is not specifically for Catholics—any young person in high school is encouraged to come.



Participants can sign up as part of a group from their home parish. If there is any teen who wants to attend but cannot find a group to join, their parent/guardian can call the diocese to help them find a group.

Bryan Wells is the manager of youth programming for Steubenville Conferences. He says putting together the youth conferences—theme, topics, music, and logistics—is a months-long process that begins more than a year in advance.

“Each spring we put together a team from across the country and we discern, ‘What are young people’s needs?’” he says. “And then we have a retreat in the fall to flesh it out. We put the talks and content development together, then we spend four months refining it.”

The 2024 theme, *Illuminate*, reflects what youth ministers say today’s teens need—an antidote to the darkness they feel. “Young people today are very aware that there is darkness in the world, and they want to do something about it,” Wells says. “We’re still really dealing with post-COVID times, and we want to focus on areas where they don’t experience joy.”

In our ever-changing world, Reyes knows that Jesus is the answer to the longing of our hearts for meaning, fulfillment, security, and love. “When I was a young adult, someone explained to me how each of us has a ‘God-sized’ hole in our hearts that only He can fill,” Reyes shared. “That conversation changed the trajectory of my life. We hope this day can provide a similar life-changing experience for all who attend, teens and adult chaperones alike.”

When asked about outcomes from the conferences, Steubenville’s Wells immediately thinks of a family who came after experiencing the loss of a loved one six months prior to attending. “A lot of the siblings came, and the parents were chaperones. We really rejuvenated them and brought light back to the family.”

He says that a lot of parents notice there is something different about their kids after returning home from a youth conference. “We’ve heard stories about sin or toxic relationships, and through the course of the weekend, they experience the love of Jesus.” This love and acceptance, says Wells, changes lives, giving teens the confidence to make positive changes. “They are set free from their addictions or can move on to a new, healthier friend group.”



Hosted by Sirius XM's Katie McGrady, Joliet Youth Day will include talks, large crowd games, worship, fellowship, food, and a concert by Sonar Worship, a five-person Catholic praise and worship band from St. Paul, Minnesota. The music, says Wells, provides a great energy to the space. "You walk into the venue and it doesn't feel like a church event," he says. "It feels cool."

Nestled between music sets, activities at Lewis University will give high school students a message they all crave: They are loved. They are worthy. And they are needed for a specific calling.

Expanding the Illuminate theme for the 2024 Joliet Youth Day, talks will include God Illuminated, The Darkness Has Not Overcome It, and The Road Illuminated. "Talks center around the blind spots people can have about who God is and how he wants to reveal himself to us," says Wells. "How does the Holy Spirit want to transform our lives?"

Despite the draw of music, food, and friends, Wells knows teens might be reluctant to attend. But he has a question and a challenge for anyone who may be hesitant: "How can you come to know what life in Christ is like unless you live it? Just come and see."

For details and registration, visit diojoliet.org/w/jyd2024.

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About the Diocese of Joliet

The Diocese of Joliet serves approximately 520,000 Catholics in 125 parishes and missions in DuPage, Ford, Grundy, Iroquois, Kankakee, Kendall and Will Counties, a geographic area of 4,218 square miles. The diocese has more than 2,700 employees in its agencies and ministries, including two early childhood education centers, 38 elementary schools, eight high schools and Catholic Charities.