

**FROM FATHER JOHN:** “Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked them, but Jesus said, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’ After he placed his hands on them, he went away.” (Matthew 19:13 – 15)

The following is Bishop Hicks’ article for the month of August. He offers a reflection on the 2025 Youth Conference in the Diocese of Joliet. It is entitled; ***We’re Going to Sell Out! Encountering Jesus at Our Youth Conference***. Seven members of our parish youth group signed up for the conference. The conference was a great success and, hopefully, it will lead the young people of our parish and diocese to a deeper relationship with our Lord Jesus. Please keep the youth of our parish in your prayers.

May God bless you and all those who love the Lord.

**FROM BISHOP HICKS:**

‘We are going to sell out all the tickets instantly!’ That was my spontaneous reaction when I first heard the news: Father Mike Schmitz had agreed to be our keynote speaker for our 2025 Youth Conference in the Diocese of Joliet.

If you do not know who Father Mike Schmitz is, it likely means you do not spend much time online or listening to Catholic podcasts. A priest of the Diocese of Duluth, Minnesota, Father Schmitz has become one of the most recognizable Catholic voices in the digital world. His *Bible in a Year* and *Catechism in a Year* podcasts have touched millions of lives. With a rare mix of clarity, humor, and conviction, he brings the Faith alive to all generations.

And that is exactly why we were elated when he was chosen as one of the speakers for our inaugural *Steubenville Joliet Youth Conference*. Yet long before a speaker was booked or ticket sales opened there was a dream to bring a *Youth Conference* to our diocese. For years, teens from the Diocese of Joliet had been traveling long distances to experience dynamic Catholic conferences hosted by Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio. The fruit was undeniable: renewed faith, deep conversions, and young people stepping into lives of discipleship. We began to ask, what if we brought that encounter home? What if we did not just send our teens away to find Christ, but invited Christ into our own backyard?

So, we did it. With prayer, planning, and no shortage of volunteers, collaborators, and donors, the Steubenville-Joliet Youth Conference took place on the weekend of June 27 - 29, 2025, at Benedictine University in Lisle, Illinois. The response was overwhelming.

Nearly 2,000 teens, plus chaperones and youth ministers, filled the campus. More than 1,700 confessions were heard. Parishes that had never connected before were praying side by side. There were moments of joyful chaos with laughter, dancing, and games, and moments of reverent silence that moved even the most skeptical hearts. One youth minister told me, ‘It felt

like this conference had been running in our diocese for ten years.' And in a way, it had, only in prayer and in the longing of many hearts.

From Friday evening to Sunday afternoon, our young people were immersed in an experience centered around Christ. There was music and praise, compelling keynote talks, breakout sessions for young men and women, and powerful times of small group reflection. But it was Saturday night's Eucharistic Adoration that left the deepest mark. I watched as Jesus in the monstrance was processed through the crowd. Two thousand voices quieted. Two thousand hearts opened. Christ was truly present—not only in the Eucharist, but also in their lives.

The weekend concluded with the Sunday closing Mass, which I had the privilege of celebrating. After the final prayer, Father Mike Schmitz stepped forward and invited anyone who was not yet baptized, but who had felt stirred by the Lord over the weekend, to come forward to receive a special blessing. He then invited any young people who were considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life to do the same. Slowly, and then more confidently, over 100 teens stood and came forward. Some were weeping, and others were smiling with unapologetic joy. As I extended my hands in blessing over each group, the entire crowd prayed for them too.

Sometimes, I worry that if a young person loves God and wants to participate in the sacramental and communal life of our Church, they can feel like an anomaly or like they are the only ones with this desire. And that can be isolating and discouraging for them. Yet, at this Youth Conference, Christ was working in their hearts, and emboldened their steps toward faith, hope, and the future with the Church. Looking out at the participants, I saw joy, renewal, and courage. These teens were not just attending a Church-sponsored youth conference. They were meeting the Lord and being sent out as disciples.

I thank the many partners who made this possible, such as our parishes, our Department of Catechesis & Evangelization, Franciscan University of Steubenville, and of course Partnership For Youth who organized the logistics of the conference. Together, apostolates, higher education, and the local church can work together to build the Kingdom of God.

We are committed to building something sustainable and Spirit-filled for the youth of our Church. I am pleased to announce that the 2026 dates for our next Youth Conference are already set: June 26 - 28, 2026, again at Benedictine University. Praise be to God, it is that popular! So, stay alert for when those tickets go on sale, because if this year was any indication, they will not last long.