

# Popular young adult retreat in its ninth year

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of the Florida Catholic staff

**NORTH PALM BEACH** | Every summer, the Passionists of Our Lady of Florida Spiritual Center design a special program for the up-and-coming generation to help young adults strengthen and understand what their faith is all about. It is a vital move since young people are the present and future Church, and they also need the Church.

"This is our ninth year," said Father Paul Wierichs, director of the spiritual center, who sent out a website invitation as a way to cast a net to get participants interested in the July 8-10 retreat. The purpose of the event is to evangelize and help young Catholics, an important segment of the Church difficult to attract in these modern days of materialism with so many secular distractions.

"To be honest with you, I really feel like we are losing your strength, the strength of all young adults, and the Church is weaker because of that," explained Father Wierichs in his website invitation. "If we can come together, we can draw strength from each other and be a more viable Church. There is ample opportunity on the (retreat) weekend for personal quiet time as well as social time."

This year, 30 participants were on hand for the retreat when we visited Saturday morning, but a dozen more had signed up. The theme of this year's program, "Be merciful as your Father," was in keeping with the Year of Mercy called by Pope Francis, when all are encouraged to experience God's mercy and love.

During the weekend, the young people came together to hear talks. They adored Jesus in the



Passionist Father Paul Wierichs, director of Our Lady of Florida Spiritual Center in North Palm Beach, welcomes the young adults attending the annual retreat at the center. (PHOTOS BY LINDA REEVES | FC)

Blessed Sacrament and prayed out loud and in silence. They reflected on what it means to be Catholic, attended Mass and socialized in the spirit of community.

"I have received so much mercy in my life," said Lynn Diem, a parishioner of Our Lady of Lourdes in Miami, who is a student at Barry University with aims on being a physician's assistant. She was attending her second retreat. "I want to learn to show mercy. God has helped me so much. I also want to find more people who want to be more merciful. I want to find more friends to grow in holiness."

Anthony Vitagliano, a member of Nativity Parish in Hollywood, was attending for a third time. He enjoys the retreat environment at

Our Lady of Florida, situated on sprawling grounds with gardens and overlooking the Intracoastal Waterway, and he likes the quiet time to reconnect to the Lord.

"I like the solitude," he said. "I like that I can get away from the hustle and bustle of life."

Stephen Sosu is a parishioner of the Cathedral of St. Ignatius Loyola in Palm Beach Gardens. This was his first retreat. "I am here to get my faith built up and to strengthen it," he said.

Michael Matthews was the main speaker July 9. Matthews grew up in Jupiter, attended Ave Maria University in Southwest Florida and was married at St. Patrick Church in Palm Beach Gardens last year. Father Wierichs was main celebrant for his wedding Mass. Matthews met Father Wierichs when he began attending retreats at the spiritual center with his father at a very young age

and continued through the years.

"I came on retreat here with my father when I was 9 years old," said the young man, who is a dynamic speaker and appeared to have the inner strength and understanding of what his faith was truly about. Apparently he was touched by the retreats he attended as a youngster and a young man, but he admitted that as he grew older they became more meaningful. "I am so blessed that my father took me along."

Matthews captivated the audience, first talking about his life, family and new bride, who is expecting a child. Then he went into depth about God's mercy, reading Scripture as part of his powerful presentation.

He encouraged the young people to experience the sacrament of reconciliation while on retreat and at least once a month in order to continue to receive God's mercy

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and to receive the graces to overcome sin.

"God completely has the right to condemn us," Matthews said. "He loves offering us mercy. He takes you by the hand and takes you away from sin."

He encouraged the young men and women to go to confession and don't hesitate because of any sin. He explained that one is encountering Jesus, and it is simple and the rewards are great.

"When you go to confession, just say your sins. Say you are sorry for them. Pope Francis says that sin is like a jewel you bring to God. When you give your sins to him, he knows it means, 'God, I love you. I want to have a relationship with you.'" ■

*The Passionists encourage all to spread the word about the annual young adult retreat traditionally held in July. For information, call Our Lady of Florida Spiritual Center at 561-626-1300. All are also encouraged to pray for young adults, that they will grow in faith and transmit faith to the generations to come.*



Michael Matthews presents a talk on God's mercy during the annual retreat for young adults at Our Lady of Florida Spiritual Center.



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