

What did Francis do?

What did Francis do?" Mike Bedesky, a guest speaker at the 2013 JPIC/ Youth Confab, answered his own question: "He gave up everything...and went out to create the Body of Christ in the community."

Bedesky, a member of St. Cecilia Catholic Church in Glen Carbon, Illinois, joined other board members of a faith-based community-organizing group, United Congregations of Metro-East (UCM), at the Confab's JPIC track.



MIKE BEDESKY

They spoke about relationship building that led to better interracial relations, faith-based commu-

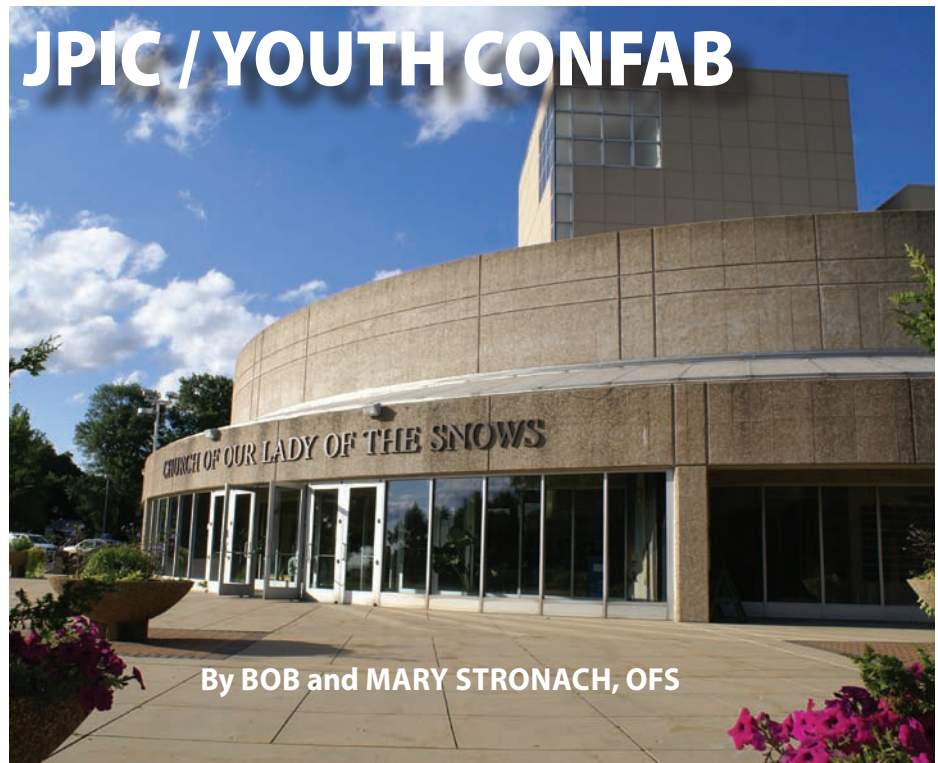
nity organizing, and improvements to the community (e.g. change in schools with lead in drinking water; repairing homes with absentee landlords; fighting a condo development that would have displaced residents of a trailer park).

Pastor Charles Burton, UCM board president, put it another way: "We believe the work of justice is the work of Christ."



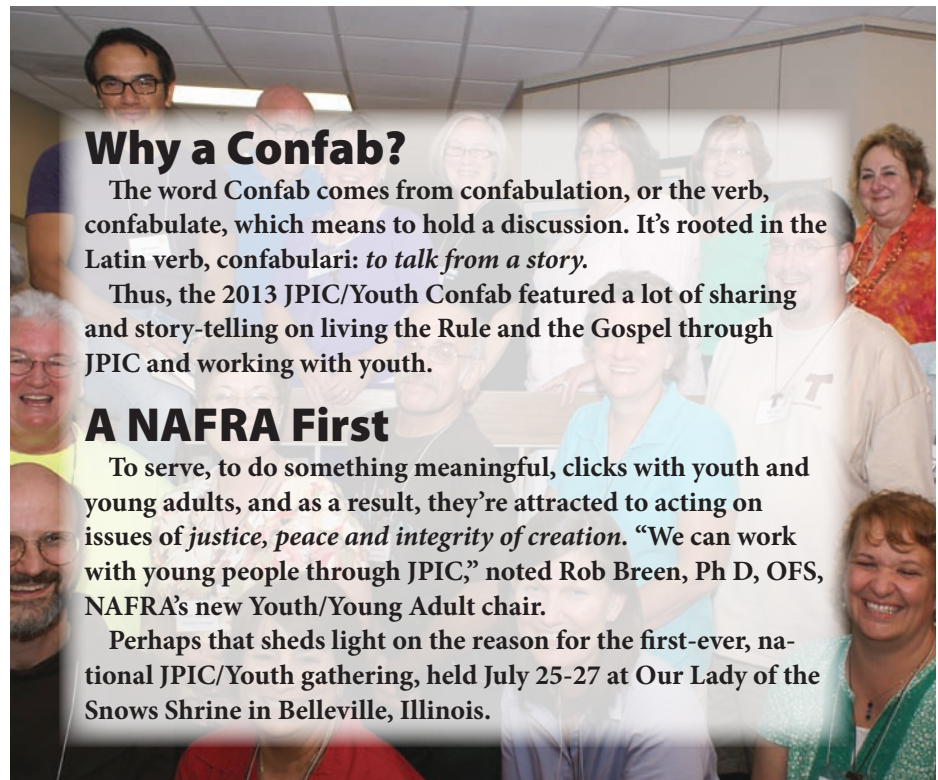
PASTOR CHARLES BURTON

There is a theological basis for this work, he said, which aims to "restore relationships" and "empower people to live whole." It begins with one-on-one discussions, in which



JPIC / YOUTH CONFAB

By BOB and MARY STRONACH, OFS



Why a Confab?

The word Confab comes from confabulation, or the verb, confabulate, which means to hold a discussion. It's rooted in the Latin verb, confabulari: *to talk from a story*.

Thus, the 2013 JPIC/Youth Confab featured a lot of sharing and story-telling on living the Rule and the Gospel through JPIC and working with youth.

A NAFRA First

To serve, to do something meaningful, clicks with youth and young adults, and as a result, they're attracted to acting on issues of *justice, peace and integrity of creation*. "We can work with young people through JPIC," noted Rob Breen, Ph D, OFS, NAFRA's new Youth/Young Adult chair.

Perhaps that sheds light on the reason for the first-ever, national JPIC/Youth gathering, held July 25-27 at Our Lady of the Snows Shrine in Belleville, Illinois.

there is genuine interest in the other.

"We call them sacred conversations," Pastor Burton noted.

These guest appearances came two days into the Confab to provide an example of JPIC in action.

The confab began with outgoing national JPIC Chair Kent Ferris, OFS, and Youth/Youth Adult Chair Rob Breen, OFS, addressing the Franciscan charism from their perspectives.

Ferris pointed to the Secular Franciscan Rule to show what JPIC was about:

- to live the Gospel (Art. 4).
- to be in the forefront of promoting justice. (Art. 15)
- to be bearers of peace (Art 19).
- to be in universal kinship with all of creation (Art. 18).

In other words, he concluded along with Franciscan leaders around the world, JPIC is part of our Franciscan DNA.

Breen noted he has had some success in “putting young people together in environmental issues” and that Secular Franciscans can work with young people through JPIC.

“Francis and Clare came to give a new charism to the world...through living the Gospel,” he said. This “continues to touch the hearts of young people today.”

He added: “I’m absolutely convinced that we’re in very parallel times, despite 800 years... We may be one of the keys for young people...because we have the Franciscan charism.”

In other words, “Franciscan spirituality can give meaning and peace to young people seeking something more out of life” in such a profane and secular world.

The opportunity to develop groups of Franciscan youth (called YouFra) necessitates a flexible approach. Breen explained YouFra this way:

- a flexible, adaptive fraternity environment.
 - designed to be a temporary experience (to live the Gospel in the spirit of Francis and Clare) on a year-to-year basis.
 - a year of formation.
 - recognizing that young people are mobile (move on after graduating).
- “The hope is they’ll eventually have that hunger and come home.”



KENT FERRIS, OFS



ROB BREEN, OFS

THE CONFAB TOOK PLACE IN THE SHRINE CONFERENCE CENTER.



• open to Catholic youth and young adults. For practical reasons (such as the vetting required for adults to work with youth), Breen wants to focus on young adults, aged 18-27. Some attend-

ees, however, wanted equal focus on youth younger than 18.

The OFS is to YouFra what the friars are to the OFS, he noted, so Secular Franciscans need to journey with YouFra.

JPIC TRACK

In addition to UCM guests, the JPIC track sported three “faculty members.” Kent Ferris introduced them this way:

- Carolyn Townes, OFS, former JPIC animator for the OFM Holy Name Province, whose life purpose is to help create a spirit of peace.
- Kim Smolik, Ed D, executive director of Franciscan Mission Service, who has spent over 18 years as an educator, activist and administrator in a variety of social justice areas.

- Rhett Engleking, OFS, who manages Franciscan Action Network’s brand new Franciscan Earth Corps and whose passion is in creating community around practices of being contemplative in action.

Coming to live the Franciscan Rule (Gospel) and recognizing JPIC as a practical way to do that, involves a process of conversion (daily conversion as the Rule says), and of accomplishing real change in our lives, Engleking pointed out before offering a paradoxical view of embracing JPIC:

“It’s easier to LIVE yourself into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of living.”

Townes referred to JPIC as “simply the Rule in action.” It “supports the restoration of right relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other and creation.” It “isn’t just something we do; it’s who we are.”

Townes went on to remind everyone that St. Francis was called to rebuild the church. “But we are the church, and we need to start with ourselves.” Then “we can move from being bearers of peace to doing peace”... such as in the conflicts, vitriolic opposing views, and misunderstandings all around.



CAROLYN TOWNES, OFS; KIM SMOLIK, Ed D, AND RHETT ENGLEKING, OFS.

“We tend to dehumanize the other side,” she said. “We need to rehumanize the other side.”

“So how do we do peace?”

She offered five actions, assigning them to each letter of the word, peace.

P - Prayer, the beginning and the end, the source, the core. “In a life of prayer, our will and God’s will act together.”

E - Empathy, the ability to imagine yourself in another’s place and understand his/her feeling. “Empathy is being present, being with.” “People will forget what you said, what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

A - Active listening. Not selective listening. “Listening is probably the greatest opportunity to enter into another’s world.” It takes work.

C - Compassion. It recognizes suffering in others, and leads to a disposition to relieve suffering. “Compassion moves us from empathy to action.”

E - Evangelical love. Love others and expect nothing in return. Thomas Aquinas points to love as the effective willing of the good of the other. “Willing the good. No regrets. No judgements.”

Townes went on to say that Corinthians provides a blueprint to love. Love

is patient (self control), kind, humble, respectful, forgiving, honest.

“Love is transformative,” interjected Engleking.

“An enemy is a friend whose story we haven’t heard yet,” added Townes.

“You are lovable,” asserted an attendee. “God doesn’t make junk.”

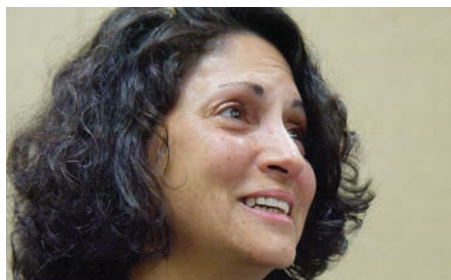
A common concern arose among participants: How to involve fraternity members in JPIC?

The first step, speakers suggested, is to get to know one another, using one-on-one conversations and getting to understand where they’re coming from and what their interests and concerns are. Take simple steps. Ask what’s comfortable for them right now.

Look at Townes’ PEACE actions “as your tools” with “your fraternity,” participant Jane DeRose-Baman piped up. “We are all living the Rule together.”

Townes’ session ended with a discussion of feeling overwhelmed by JPIC. “That’s why we begin with prayer,” said Kent Ferris. “... There’s a risk of feeling you’ve got to do more... Just do your best.”

Added National Minister Tom Bello, OFS: “Your job is what God wants you to do this day.”



In the next session, Kim Smolik put the focus again on relationships. “To work JPIC, we need to build relationships.” The Franciscan charism calls us to focus on solidarity, to pray together, to act through a connectedness. “We trust that investing time in relationships actually has a product outcome,” even though the emphasis is “to live out the calling and not to be concerned about end results and product.”

She offered a discussion question: How have you been a bridge builder in your life?

One attendee related a presentation on immigration that helped dispel clichés and myths. Another pointed to a discussion that helped lessen tension between pro-life and peace-and-justice activists. “Be one people, not either/or.” A third offered: “When I get people together on a task, the shared experience can transcend differences of opinion.”



KIM SMOLIK

The idea of being a bridge builder transitioned to the next session, “*Bridging Our Disorder*,” with Rhett Engleking quickly pointing to such a need within fraternities.

“We want to live with a Franciscan heart, but we often don’t,” he said, suggesting that there are four “dis-orders” sometimes afflicting fraternities: discord, disengagement, disorganization, and disassociation (“We don’t reach out to other groups.”)

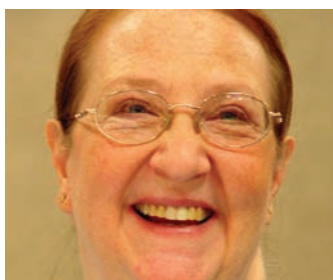
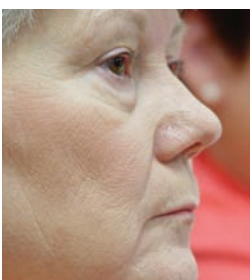
Participants broke into four groups to tackle those “dis-orders.” The one that zeroed in on disassociation, for example, pointed to such factors as being selfish and unwilling to learn and dialogue. The group suggested the following actions: Dialogue, education, mutual invitation, with training (formation) at regular gatherings and time spent together getting to know one another.

“All four disorders have a common theme,” said DeRose-Baman. “Selfishness. And that’s not in our Rule.”

Engleking noted that the value of doing one-on-ones, or “sacred conversations,” in the fraternity is that they can “rekindle” and “make it better.” The idea is to get to know someone, not do an interrogation, but to see a connection. “We have nothing to gain except the relationship with somebody else.”



RHETT ENGLEKING, OFS



YOUTH TRACK

Participants in the Youth Track were spending time in small groups addressing the future of YouFra in the U.S.

Noted Rob Breen: “We acknowledged this was an historic and sacred moment because we put together the strategy, goals and steps for implementing a nationwide YouFra movement.”

While primarily addressing 18 to 27 year olds, the YouFra strategy includes: outreach, formation, events and activities, structure/capacity building -- plus, Franciscan teen ministry.

The YouFra model is one of a small faith community, of gathering people into fraternity, paralleling the Secular Franciscan fraternity. “We’ll provide opportunity for service, prayer, social activities, and servant leadership development. It’s not an order, but a parallel organization that exists at the local, regional, national and international levels.”

“Historically,” he added, “we’ve always had Franciscan groups of youth, but now we have the steps and mechanism for them to set up and run their own organization. And that’s what we’re committing to, nationally.”

A key, he noted, is for youth to run YouFra themselves, with the guidance of spiritual assistants and Secular Franciscan animators, and sponsorship of a fraternity. “It needs to be adaptable and meet the needs of youth, and we recognize new YouFra groups will need leadership intervention until they develop their own servant leaders.”

The action plan coming out of the confab was to be submitted to existing YouFra groups and the Youth/Young Adult Commission for comment, and then to the October NAFRA gathering.

“One year from now,” Breen said, “we will have the basic handbook done to begin the formal formation and official creation of YouFra groups. That’s what we committed to.”



FINAL SESSION

Deacon Tom Bello, who managed to spend time in both Confab tracks, addressed a joint session the final evening, trying to sum up the past two days.

“How can JPIC and YouFra help us?” he asked.

“1. JPIC is the wholeness of our Rule lived out in action with prayer and contemplation.

“2. JPIC is the restoration of right relationship with God, with each other, with ourselves, with all of creation.”

He prayed for a yearly hands-on national activity or activities for JPIC and YouFra.

His prayer list for attendees returning home (like returning missionaries):

1. share stories of the confab.
2. keep the fire of faith & Spirit alive.
3. prepare yourself and others for life-long ministry to God and one another.
4. always see God in the other.
5. always neighbor with all in need.
6. be the Bridge.
7. keep our great Secular Franciscan Order alive and holy.

“I want you to be that relational bridge.”

“**What is the** Holy Spirit calling us to be?” Bello further asked.

As we “come down from the mountain,” as we return home, “that is the question we have to face.”

“It’s clear to me the Holy Spirit is asking us...our new Holy Father” is asking us, to be a “presence” in the world.

Pope Francis issued a “call for saints” at World Youth Day in Brazil.

“All of you must go forth to do that.”

“Amen!” roared the applauding participants.

On that note, the evening turned celebratory, with participants breaking out in song and sharing funny tales.





SIDEBARS

Touched by Prayer, Song

The JPIC / Youth Confab was touched by a joy of prayer and song. Right from the welcoming dinner, the Confab opened with singing the Little Office of St. Francis (*The Office of the Passion of Saint Francis of Assisi: The Geste of the Great King*).

It was “written by our holy father Francis,” said NAFRA Secretary Jan Parker, OFS, who led the singing on a guitar along with Shrine pianist Heather Miller. “He prayed it seven times a day...and sang it.”

Thanks to finally having a good translation, she noted, English-speaking Franciscans can pray it. The office they distributed to attendees -- a third edition 2012 printing -- was first published in 2011. The book was put together by OFM friars Laurent Gallant and Andre Cirino, with music by Secular Franciscan Josef Raischl.

“As I use it, I feel a real connection with Francis...It brought me closer to him.”

She noted: “Like a troubadour, he tells the story of Christ...(and) brings us into the Paschal Mystery...You learn about his spirituality,” his understanding of what was most important.

“Francis was a singer, an actor,” added Youth/Young Adult Chair Rob Breen, OFS. “He even sang on his death bed.”

The office is “supposed to be sung,” to be “joyful, alive.”

Gift from Vietnam

Br. Donald Lachowicz, OFM, a spiritual assistant who just returned from an assignment in Vietnam where he taught English in a seminary, gave every attendee a Tau carved from coconut shells. Each was grinded, carved and polished by a Vietnamese seminarian.

“A gift from Tran Van Tuan, a Franciscan aspirant.”



MOST OF THE JPIC TRACK PARTICIPANTS.



MOST OF THE YOUTH TRACK PARTICIPANTS.

