

Special needs youth ministry program is ‘a gift from God’ for families

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JOHNS CREEK—Five members of St. Brigid Church received the sacrament of confirmation this spring as one aspect of a parish ministry for middle and high school students with disabilities that uses teen volunteers.

Nicole Fehd, Daniel Medina, Joseph Newton, Abraham Vigil and Gavin Wise received the sacrament of confirmation during the Saturday vigil Mass April 16. Bishop David P. Talley celebrated the Mass at the Johns Creek parish and administered the sacrament.

Alyshia Koerner, special needs youth ministry coordinator at St. Brigid, said the ministry began in the fall of 2013. The program is for those ages 11 to 21, and this year served 17 people. Preparation for confirmation is one component of the overall ministry.

“Preparation is really just about the desire of the parents and teens to continue on in their faith formation,” said Koerner in an

“This is the journey of many families who face these issues with these beautiful and precious souls that God has entrusted people with. ... I call it a journey because it’s a perpetual search for safe, accepting and nurturing places for special needs children and young adults.”

Maria Vigil

email. “Our program curriculum is based on theology and catechesis, and their attendance to our weekly LTE (Life Teen/Edge special needs) nights on Monday evenings is the requirement for their preparation.”

Teen volunteers, who are paired up with a teen with special needs, assist Koerner weekly.

“They are there to offer assistance and companionship throughout the evening,” she said.



PHOTO BY THOMAS SPINK

Abraham Vigil, dressed in red, stands with his parents, Maria and Ben Vigil, at the confirmation Mass of the special needs ministry of St. Brigid Church this spring. Abraham, who has epilepsy and hypotonic cerebral palsy, chose St. George as his confirmation saint.

Koerner said the program is a good transition from the work the teens with disabilities have already done in the parish school of religion, yet it offers a new take on catechesis and socialization.

“The program is set up similarly to how Edge and Life Teen run their nights,” said Koerner. “This structure provides teens with the opportunity to gather together with opportunities each night for

learning, spiritual growth through prayer, fun activities, and community building. Ultimately, we want all of the teens, those with special needs and those volunteering, to feel a part of the church in their own way.”

A sense of belonging is created, and faith is fostered through short, engaging teachings and activities geared toward the individual’s needs and abilities.

Program is “a gift from God”

Abraham Vigil selected St. George, soldier and martyr, as his confirmation saint. Abraham, 14, has epilepsy and hypotonic cerebral palsy.

His mother, Maria, said the diagnosis may sound straightforward, but it has meant numerous doctors’ visits and evaluations and “many hours of prayers and tears” to arrive where Abraham is today.

“This is the journey of many



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PHOTO BY THOMAS SPINK

The Knights of Columbus of St. Brigid serve as honor guards for the parish's April 16 confirmation Mass for young people with disabilities as the candidates process into the sanctuary. Five students received the sacrament of confirmation administered by Bishop David P. Talley.

families who face these issues with these beautiful and precious souls that God has entrusted people with," said Maria Vigil. "The journey continues. I call it a journey because it's a perpetual search for safe, accepting and nurturing places for special needs children and young adults."

Abraham is able to get around on his own but is unable to read and care for himself completely. He takes medications to help control epilepsy and takes part in weekly speech, occupational and physical therapy sessions.

"He really loves going to his special needs Edge class at St. Brigid's during the school year," said Vigil.

Abraham also enjoys going to the movies, swimming, playing Miracle League baseball in Forsyth County, and spending time with family.

"For Abraham to get to this point it has taken many earthly angels to guide and support not only him but his parents too," said Vigil.

She called it a team effort beginning with Bishop Talley as St. Brigid's former pastor, and current pastor Father Neil Herlihy's commitment, the support of parish staff and priests who visit classes, and the loving teen volunteers.

"We, as a family, see this program as a gift from God," said Vigil.

Abraham's confirmation sponsor was his aunt, Teresa Vigil, who has been a big part of his life since birth.

"She has been a wonderful example of Christ's light in the everyday," said Vigil.

Vigil acknowledged that when families receive a diagnosis for their child, there is often a period of interior mourning and struggle, causing a withdrawal or turning toward educational and spiritual assistance outside of Catholic parishes.

The Vigil family drives 45 minutes and passes several other parishes because of the love, support and catechetical options offered to Abraham at St. Brigid.

"Many families with special needs children and young adults would tell you they would travel far and wide for this if it were available," said Vigil. "I hope that these types of opportunities can become more widely available throughout the diocese."

Disabilities Ministry offers training

The mission of the Archdiocese of Atlanta Disabilities Ministry is to support the archbishop's mandate for full participation of persons with disabilities in the life of the church.

Other models of religious education programs held up by the Disabilities Ministry as successful examples include those of St. John Neumann Church in Lilburn and Sophia Academy in Atlanta.

St. John Neumann Church received the Loyola Press Open Doors award in 2014 for welcoming all into parish life, exemplifying pastoral care.



PHOTO BY THOMAS SPINK

Confirmation candidates and their sponsors listen to encouraging words from Bishop David P. Talley, celebrant of the April 16 confirmation Mass for students with disabilities at St. Brigid Church in Johns Creek.

Sophia Academy, an independent Catholic school affiliated with the Society of Mary, provides personalized education tailored to the needs of students with mild to moderate learning differences.

Special needs curricula are available for parish use through approved Catholic publishers. Training is available through the Disabilities Ministry for religious education directors and catechists upon request.

Koerner, who has both undergraduate and graduate degrees in special education, said smaller parishes could start by assessing the need and by listening to parents about the best way to support teens with special needs.

"We are blessed at St. Brigid to have adults who support me and the wonderful teens that allow for me to run a teen-on-teen ministry. We could not do it without their

help and love for these teens," she said.

For information on special needs educational resources available to

parishes through the Disabilities Ministry of the archdiocese, contact Maggie Rousseau, ministry director, at mrousseau@archatl.com.

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