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## Youth minister describes how she gave self to God

*Young adult conference blends contemporary culture with faith, education and worship*

By Mary Beth DeLisi  
Correspondent

STIRLING — Caroline Gambale is a youth minister who knows that when it comes to evangelization, sometimes it just ain't easy.

During her 14 years as a youth minister, Gambale, who serves as the area coordinator of LifeTeen for New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania and as the youth minister at St. Joseph's Parish, Hillsborough, has felt the Holy Spirit prompt her to share stories of God's love at bachelorette parties, in airports and even with members of the New York Giants.

"When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you can't help but proclaim. This is God's desire for us. And sometimes, you have to step out of your comfort zone," Gambale told the nearly 200 young adults who gathered June 10 at St. Vincent de Paul Parish for the third annual New Jersey Young Adult Conference. This year's theme of Highly Flammable centered on Luke 12:42, "I have come to set the world on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing."

Gambale gave the keynote address at the conference that featured workshops, eucharistic adoration, reconciliation, Mass, praise and worship, and a barbecue. Workshops covered such topics as dating and relationships, confession, working for social justice from a faith perspective and the connectedness between pop-culture and the Gospel as evidenced in the rock band U2.

### Lively and reverent

Attendees hailed from all five of the state's dioceses. Michael Wojcik and Christopher Burns from the Metuchen Diocesan Office for Youth & Young Adult Ministry participated. Noting that this year's event was the first statewide conference, Wojcik said, "It was a great opportunity to meet and talk with so many in their 20s and 30s from our diocese who are looking for more, as well as those who had been away from the church," Wojcik said, noting the long lines of people at the sacrament of reconciliation. He described the conference as "a great model" for young adult ministry. "It blended contemporary culture with faith, and education with worship all in a lively yet reverent style," he said.

Teens, young adults and couples with children came to "receive the Holy Spirit in an awesome way," as Chrissy Guerra, an emcee and member of the planning committee, remarked in her welcome.

### Lost and found

In her address, Gambale infused humor and spoke about how she became involved in youth ministry and evangelization. She said that while in

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college, she felt like she had been living a double life, living out the Christian call to serve while also living like her peers — drinking and partying.

"I thought I was a good Catholic, but I still wanted to have fun. God wasn't first in my life, and I felt an emptiness," Gambale recalled. She said a friend invited her to attend a charismatic prayer group meeting, and she hesitantly accepted. Gambale said as she nervously waited to be prayed over by a prayer team, she told God she just wanted to know him better, and she had a strong feeling that God wanted her to give herself completely to him. While she was prayed over, Gambale said she felt God's love and presence in a way she never had before. "At that point, I had been so lost, but after that, I was so filled with joy and love that it made me want to love God back and live the way he wanted me to," she explained. "My love for others was so tremendous that I wanted them to know about God's love for them. When you fall in love with God, you can't wait to tell everyone about his love."

### Getting bold

When Gambale returned to school, friends rejected her and her new way of life. She decided that when the semester ended, she would transfer to another school and study theology. Prior to leaving, Gambale asked a classmate named Rob to share his notes with her to prepare for a final exam. They started talking, and she felt the Spirit prompting her to tell Rob about God in her life. "I didn't want to do it. I told God that I had lost enough friends over this, but God said to do it, and I was faithful," she recalled.

When she was through speaking, Gambale said Rob told her that the night before they met, Rob had prayed to God to send someone to help him get to know God better. "He said I was the answer to his prayer. Who am I to say no? It's not up to us to say no. God gives us a spirit of boldness," Gambale proclaimed.

Gambale shared a few other stories of when she got the spirit of boldness. In her former position as Director of CYO/Youth Ministry in the Newark Archdiocese, Gambale mentored one of the football players from the Giants who did an internship with her office.

"I was a bit intimidated. We did this big abstinence and chastity event, and I made him go," Gambale remembered. She said that next day the player, whose name she did not reveal, asked her if she really believed in chastity and abstinence. When she told him she did, he was astounded. "I got the spirit of boldness and told him, 'If you think football's tough, with its rigorous workouts and practices, you should try living the Christian life. That's tough. That's real difficulty,'" Gambale said.

She concluded, "Our goal isn't conversion. It's to be faithful to Jesus' command to preach the Gospel to the world. It's God's job to transform hearts. It's our job to put [his word] out there. And it's not our job to figure out who to share with. God's mercy and love have to extend to the whole earth. If someone's not listening, that's okay. If only one person hears you, it's worth it."

Read The Catholic Spirit next week for more coverage of the third annual New Jersey Young Adult Conference.

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