

## Religious Revolution

By Theresa Vachon

“La di la, doo di doo, I am bored, How about you?” This rhyme floated across my mind as I sat in yet another of my religious education classes, staring at the light blue paneling on the walls. My teacher, Doctor Hougendoubler, was a great man, but his teaching style for our Sunday morning religious class, Messengers, gave me little to focus on. As a sophomore in high school, I had met people who had churches that had so much more to offer than mine. Their churches consisted of music, faith, fellowship, and fun—mine consisted of sitting at one of the round tables in Assumption Hall and listening as Doc talked on and on about the things that we should not do.

Not only did these classes bore everyone in them, but I had also gone to class a whole year before I got to know any of my twenty-three classmates very well. The people I knew had graduated, and so I began the task of meeting new people all over again. Meeting new people never came easily to me, and this new lack of friends led me to enjoy being there and learning even less in class than I normally would have.

That same fall I joined the church’s Pastoral Parish Council, which helped the priest make decisions about issues at church. Being one of two teen representatives challenged me, and the adults wanted to know everything that happened in our Messengers class. My fellow teen representative, Nick, seldom spoke up with information, so I knew I had to talk. I was in a tight spot and realized that I had to tell them the truth—I spent every Sunday morning trying to learn and failed miserably, not only at that, but also at feeling like I had any kind of relationship with Jesus. I told the council how I really felt, a stunning blow to those who thought that everything

was great.

This revelation of my spiritual condition brought about some change. Before long Deb, my seventh grade religious education teacher, contacted me and told me that she wanted to take me to a teen mass up in Fort Wayne, IN. So Nick and I journeyed with Deb up to St. Vincent's Catholic Church to our first LifeTeen Mass. LifeTeen started as a new way to get teens involved in the Catholic Church a few years ago in Texas and has a "by teens, for teens" nature.

Just arriving at St. Vincent's brought a feeling that things were about to change forever. My head turned constantly and my eyes darted from side to side, trying to take everything in. Nick and I noticed the same thing at the same time, and we turned to Deb.

"Deb, there are actually teenagers here! Look, there are teen lectors and teen ushers! Hey, the whole band is teenagers too!" I exclaimed, and continued to gaze at the strange sight around me.

Before mass started we took our seats in the wooden pews with some of the seasoned parishioners, realizing that we would soon experience something different and new. As mass continued, we saw the teens contributing in many ways. The scripture readings were read to us by teenage lectors, the singing by a cantor not much older than me, and even Holy Communion was passed by teenage Eucharistic ministers.

Father did not just stand up at the pulpit and lecture down to the members of the church; instead he used two teen actors and the homily became a skit. Father really worked to make us examine our lives and compare ourselves to the teens in the skit, which got me to thinking. "I love the way mass works here. Can I not do anything about how things work back home at St. Mary's? I wish things at my church could be like they are here, but I cannot really do anything on my own."

Mass continued on. After Communion, I knelt between Nick and Tammy on the red cushioned kneeler, thinking of how great it would be to go to church like this every week. I decided that the time had come to ask Jesus what I could do. "Dear Heavenly Father, I thank You for bringing me here to this wonderful mass. It has truly changed how I think about You, and I wish I could take this back to the others. If there was a way for You to do this, I would do everything I could to make this happen for others. I ask in Your Name, Amen." The Lord answered my prayer, and from that moment on, I had to act.

The group of us that went to St. Vincent's that night became the basis for the Core Team, the group of adults and teens who would plan our own teen events. We held meetings with the Parish Council, and the ball started rolling. It was not hard to convince the members of the council that the church needed something special for teens, because enrollment had reached a low point. Father Gary agreed to let us start our own LifeTeen program like the one at St. Vincent's. Soon we owned the copyrights to the program and all the resources that came with it, so all that remained was to get the word out.

We scheduled the first mass for January 16, 2004, and we possessed very little time to get the news to the teens due to the holiday bustle that occurs around Christmas. The Core Team decided that in order to get the attention of the teens of our parish, the announcement needed to be from one teen to another. Unfortunately for me, I drew the short stick and ended up with the duty of explaining LifeTeen to the whole church. The problem with that? Stage fright has always dragged me down, and the idea of speaking for three different masses in front of hundreds of people made my stomach flip. But I had told God that I would do whatever it would take, and so I knew I had to do this.

The day that I had to speak arrived all too quickly. I walked down from my normal place

in the choir loft clutching a piece of paper, on which I had written what I planned to say. The walk up to the front of the church took an eternity, and fear filled me at the idea of tripping in the dressy shoes and clothes my mother had instructed me to wear. The walk to the first of four green marble pillars went successfully, and I gained some confidence when a family friend gave me a thumbs-up and a big grin on my way past the second giant tower of marble. Upon reaching the third pillar I stopped to wait for Father Gary to introduce me as part of the end-of-mass announcements. I did not want to hear it, but the sooner it came the better, because then it would be over.

“And now we have Theresa Vachon, here to talk about a new group called LifeTeen,” boomed Father’s voice. With the announcement I hurried past the final pillar and bent down on one knee before stepping up onto the polished wooden floor of the altar. As I stepped up to the microphone, I did not look out at the people in the pews, and looked down at my paper to begin reading.

“Hello, I am Theresa Vachon, and I am a sophomore at Huntington North High School. I am here today...” I paused for a second as I looked out and saw all of the strange faces before me. “...to tell you about a new opportunity for the junior high and senior high school students. It is called LifeTeen.”

At this point I forced my eyes off of my pre-written script and forced myself to make eye contact as I continued.

“LifeTeen is designed especially for teenagers who want to grow in their faith. The group is by teens for teens, with a special teen mass once a month with more contemporary music and a social event afterward. Our first mass is January 16, and I hope you will all consider coming. Thank you.”

As I stepped down and continued back to the choir loft, I noticed that the walk past the pillars became much easier and that several people gave me encouraging smiles.

This first speech on my part helped to bring people to the LifeTeen activities. Over one hundred people attended the first mass, and soon we had a fun way for teens to stay involved in church. Since then, the group has expanded from doing the monthly teen mass to events like bowling, skating, bonfires, lock-ins, two junior high retreats, and three senior high retreats. Friendships formed that will last forever. Going to church no longer meant sitting on the stiff wooden pew bored out of your brains.

Three years after that first presentation at church, I spoke before the members of my church again. This time, a completely different person walked past those same marble pillars to the previously feared microphone. This person knew that she could speak in front of people without being attacked by butterflies and waves of sweat. It was at this point that I realized in the process of helping to create a group for teens and especially in forming retreats and teachings for the junior high teens, that these lessons and friendships were not the only things that were created. In creating them, I created a better relationship with my God and a more confident me.