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## High Schoolers Deepen Their Faith During Immersive SHU Journey

Michelle Loris

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High school students from across the state met at Sacred Heart University in late June, prepared to embark on a journey of faith learning, self-exploration, music ministry, prayer, liturgy and community service.

The six-day summer institute brought 33 high school students and seven SHU mentors together for the University's first "SHU Journey: To God and the World Through the Catholic Intellectual Tradition." A \$559,654 grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. funded the program, for which interested students applied in the spring.

"This has been an extraordinary experience for Sacred Heart," said Michelle Loris, associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and lead organizer of the SHU Journey. "It's a wonderful opportunity for SHU to advocate its mission in the Catholic intellectual tradition. It's also an opportunity for young people to deepen their faith and their understanding of themselves."

Mornings began with prayers, reflection and music before participants broke into groups for classroom instruction. June-Ann Greeley, associate professor of theology and religious studies, and Fr. Anthony Ciorra, assistant vice president of mission and Catholic identity, discussed a new theme in each class. In one of Greeley's early classes, students discussed people they believed to be leaders. Students named Mother Theresa, Pope Francis and Bishop Frank Caggiano of the Diocese of Bridgeport, describing them as compassionate, supportive, observant, grateful and inspirational.

Greeley said the discussions generated notions of what leadership is like. She hoped that, when the students returned home at the end of the week, they would reflect on what they learned. Moreover, she hopes when they return to school in the fall, they could start a conversation or propose a project to help their communities, Greeley said.

Each day after instruction, students gathered with their SHU mentors to discuss the overall experience, as well as the day's lessons. Some commented that they didn't know what to expect upon applying for the institute, but they were pleased to be learning and doing so much.

"The students reacted well," Ciorra said. "They loved it. They really bonded with each other, and they were excited to be here."

Students heard from guest speakers like Dan McCarthy, CEO of Frontier Communications. McCarthy, who serves on SHU's Board of Trustees, shared his experiences as a successful businessman with a strong faith who also serves as a lay leader in his church. He returned for the Institute's commencement exercises where he gave the students tips for becoming Catholic leaders. He urged them to use their talents to make the community a better place, to help shape future generations and to work on impacting those who are marginalized by society.

Kerry Robinson, executive director of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management in Washington D.C., also spoke to students during the week. Her organization promotes excellence and best practices in management, finances and human resource development of the Catholic Church. Robinson spoke about her background, her travels, her job and how to make young people's voices matter in the church.

When Loris asked the students and mentors to tell Robinson about something from the institute that stood out to them, the group had much to say. One student said he enjoyed learning about his peers' life experiences. Others talked about community service work they performed at Bridgeport nonprofit organizations during the week. Another student said a moment that stood out for him was when a nun at one of the nonprofits read a poem of appreciation to the group and started crying. A SHU mentor said that seeing her group interact with a nonprofit's disabled clients was "beautiful." Another mentor said he was gratified that the students are so enthusiastic about participating in community service.

"My favorite part of my week was being here today," Robinson said at the end of her talk. "I'm really impressed." She said she was pleased to see many high school students spending part of their summer vacation involved in the program.

The institute also included a visit to the Cloisters museum in New York, music ministry and team-building exercises.

The mentors, who had received training beforehand, said they wanted to be part of the program because it was a great opportunity to help high school students learn about their faith and themselves. "I really think we succeeded at that," said Rebecca Dupre, a senior studying health science. "And, they made

somany friends.”

