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## Young South Floridians sing praises of church life

By James D. Davis  
Religion Editor

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Surrounded by Christmas trees and colorful lights, 15 young voices blend in tricky harmonies, guided by the sweeping gestures of Victoria Stevens' hands: "*Hodie, Christus Natus Est ...* "

Something is wrong here. Or maybe, something is right. The singers, 19 to 26 years old, are rehearsing for a church concert -- at a time when, for many young people, religious activities take a back seat to Christmas revelry.

Ask them about it, and the young leaders from St. Andrew Catholic Church in Coral Springs just smile. It's not that they're against the festivities. They just found something more important.

"Sure, Christmas is presents and decorations and partying -- but there's a deeper meaning," said Virginia Gacharna, 23, a youth leader with the church. "It's the savior coming to Earth, to free us from everything that isn't love.

"When I sing the Christmas *Gloria*, I want to cry and shout at the same time," she said with a bright smile. "Nothing else compares to it."

The enthusiasm runs counter to some national studies. Christian pollster George Barna has found that only a third of those who are 22 years and younger attend church any given Sunday. Of all age groups, Barna says, the young are the least likely to pray, read the Bible or volunteer time to their churches.

That gives churches a special drive to reach them. In South Florida, growing numbers of congregations -- including Christ the Rock in Cooper City, Christ Fellowship in Palm Beach Gardens, and First Baptist Church of Fort Lauderdale -- are devoting sizable resources to attracting young people.

When they succeed, churches can help turn youthful yearnings into fervor, said Victoria Stevens, conducting the recent rehearsal for St. Andrew.

"Young people are ardent about faith," said Stevens, 22, a Life Teen alumna herself. "If truth is proclaimed, and not watered down or sentimentalized, the youth will hear it, know it and want it."

The rehearsal, at the Stevens residence in Coral Springs, is casual and laced with frequent jokes. Stevens, who will enter the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, in January, gently but firmly guides the singers through several challenging numbers, including *Adoramus Te* and *Prepare Ye the Way*.

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Traditional and contemporary songs are part of the music sheet at St. Andrew. The young adults help run a program called Life Teen, organizing Sunday night Mass with the teens and families, plus Friday night meetings for themselves.

"One of the markers of this generation is community, wanting to belong," said John Beaulieu, director of youth and young adult outreach at Franciscan University. "They like big-picture things, and being part of them."

Catholic youths also attend summer youth conferences sponsored by Steubenville; a total of 34,100 came to 15 rallies around the country this year. The university will conduct a one-day gathering in March at Pope John Paul II High School in Boca Raton.

Although St. Andrew youth leader Gacharna expects to be at Mass today, Christmas Eve is the big occasion for her folks. Like other Hispanic families, they like the evening Mass followed by a festive dinner, then midnight Rosary prayer. Christmas Day is mainly for relaxing with the family.

"For us, it's a day to celebrate being together," said Gacharna, a pharmacy technician.

She was born in Chicago and attended a Catholic school, then went through confirmation. But she was just going through the motions, she said.

"I knew all the questions and answers, but it didn't fulfill me spiritually or emotionally," she recalled.

She moved to South Florida in 2000 and helped at her father's restaurant in Margate. She didn't attend church anywhere for a month, until a friend invited her to a Life Teen meeting St. Andrew.

That was it for Virginia: "I was captured by the music." She started attending regularly, and was then asked to help start a group for young adults.

"I think a lot of Hispanics are like that," she said. "They first go to church because their parents make them. Then, when they grow up, they have to make their own decision.

"They often become curious about the faith. And they fall in love with it for themselves."

Church is the place for Arturo Bardales on Christmas Day -- especially to set an example for the teens he ministers to. Bardales, 26, also joined other youth performers Dec. 15 for a seasonal concert at St. Andrew, singing tenor and bass and playing bass guitar.

But the holiday can be bittersweet for someone from Lima, Peru, on his own in America.

"On Christmas Day I'm often sad," he confessed. "I hear that it's a time for getting with your family, but I have no family here.

"But it's even more important to be with God," he continued. "So I'll be in church on Christmas Day. I'm in the best place when I'm serving God."

It's a different attitude than he held in Lima, where he dropped out of church after Catholic high school. He preferred partying, at least until the day after.

"I was happy for moments," he said. "But the next day I'd wake up and realize I was empty. I had nothing of substance."

He was ready for change when old high school friends invited him to church. To his surprise, a youth coordinator asked him to play guitar for a confirmation service.

Others asked him to take part in a concert and in the choir.

"I found God loved me and trusted me," Bardales recalled. "He wanted me there."

When he came to the United States in 2004, he stayed with a brother in California for six months, then moved to South Florida. In Coral Springs, he set out on foot and walked for three hours, asking people where he could find a church. As it turned out, St. Andrew was a mere five blocks from his apartment.

He met a youth minister who quickly asked him to become a Life Teen leader. Later, friends asked him to join the youth Mass choir. He's even become a Eucharistic minister, helping serve Holy Communion once a month, he said with amazement.

For Bardales, they're all signs from above. "It was the same that happened in Peru," he said. "God wanted me to do this."

And even though he has no family in South Florida, he won't be alone today: He has four invitations to Christmas dinner.

"Right now, I feel like the people at the church are my family," he said with a smile.

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