

Archbishop sees Charities 'cherish the divine within'

As Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien toured three Catholic Charities' programs that care for children with severe emotional disturbances and developmentally disabled adults Jan. 16, he was thunderstruck by the motto "Cherish the Divine Within" written in one of the Timonium buildings.

"That's exactly what the staff and volunteers do in these programs," Archbishop O'Brien said after touring Villa Maria, St. Vincent's Center and Gallagher Services. "When I saw the respect the staff has for those wonderful people, I was deeply moved."

The patience the staff demonstrated with the emotionally troubled children - many of whom have been abused or bounced around the foster-care system - and the developmentally disabled adults in these facilities illustrates their dedication, he said.

"The goodness that is given to people with real human challenges is based on the notion that every life is precious and they are treated as someone special," Archbishop O'Brien said. "It's a true pro-life message."

The prelate began his morning at the Villa Maria Residential Treatment Center that serves children 5 to 14 with severe emotional disturbances.

His guide was a 9-year-old client named Briana who is preparing to leave the facility where she received intensive therapy and learned social coping skills.

Without a shred of intimidation, she showed the new archbishop of Baltimore her vast stuffed-animal collection in her bedroom, the viola she has been learning how to play and the "10 Commandments of the Chapel," that listed mandates like, "respect the speaker," "no cursing," "no fighting, aggression or assault," and "respect yourself and the people around you."

"We also keep a book where we list our good decisions," she told Archbishop O'Brien. "We have things in here about good manners, you know, the important

things. We get to take this with us when we leave.”

At the St. Vincent Center – another residential treatment center for children 13 and younger with serious behavioral and psychiatric problems – he had a chance to observe the recent renovations to the former orphanage that now provides each child with their own bedroom.

“This is a place where they can go at night and just feel safe,” said Mary Rode, administrator at the facility. “It’s just one thing here that has made such a difference in the lives of these children.”

From the time the youngsters arrive at St. Vincent’s, the staff is working for their discharge, and 85 percent of them transition into a family-type home, either through adoption, a stable foster home or returning to their natural parents when appropriate, Ms. Rode said.

While touring Gallagher Services – a residential and day program for individuals with developmental disabilities – Archbishop O’Brien watched some of the clients dancing to music and explored one of the apartments that houses eight women, which is staffed with healthcare professionals and outfitted to accommodate their wheelchairs.

“About half of our clients don’t have any family involvement,” said Mark Shulz, lifetime services division director of Gallagher Services.

“You are their family,” Archbishop O’Brien replied.