

Archdiocesan leaders seeking solutions to epidemic of violence

The Archdiocese of Baltimore prayed for peace in Baltimore City when summer began.

Rarely was tranquility a reality.

Since Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien met with city religious leaders May 27 at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park to deplore violence – murders, beatings and shootings have dominated local headlines and newscasts.

The crime problems that have plagued the city for decades have been an unwelcome presence in poor neighborhoods and tourist attractions alike.

Now the archdiocese and The Catholic Review, which is funding a Sept. 12 "Gun Turn-in" at St. Gregory the Great Parish (story on Page 13), are trying to find ways to stop the bloodshed.

More than 140 murders have taken place in the city this year, after an encouraging 2008 that saw homicides dip 17 percent from 2007. Still, the 234 murders left Baltimore's homicide rate, with 37 slayings per 100,000 residents, near the top among major American cities.

The city grabbed national headlines in July when 18 people were shot during a gang confrontation, horrifying Archbishop O'Brien, who formerly was the head of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services.

"It's safer in Iraq and Afghanistan, I think, sometimes," Archbishop O'Brien told The Catholic Review. "Still, there are good people out there patrolling the streets and taking an interest in the neighborhoods and sacrificing themselves for the youth in the communities. If not for them, it could be much worse."

Concern grips even the Inner Harbor, where an Aug. 16 gang altercation resulted in two people being shot at the Light Street pavilion.

"I just think we have to work harder," Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden told The Catholic Review. "Those are desperate people doing desperate things. They are divorced from the community and have no sense of care or concern. When you have shootings like that - or when children or a pregnant woman get shot - there's no sense of concern. We really have to turn those things around. That's unsettling."

A Baltimore boy who attended the Catholic Campaign for Human Development's annual awards luncheon Aug. 18 said he was at the Inner Harbor the night of shooting. He did not witness the shooting but later saw the victims.

"I saw a lot of blood trails," the 13-year-old said. "I couldn't believe it."

The same day of the CCHD luncheon, a black man was beaten by three white men at Fort Armistead Park, in the city near the Francis Scott Key Bridge. One of the men arrested, Calvin E. Lockner, goes by the nickname "Hitler," according to Frederick H. Bealefeld III, Baltimore police commissioner.

"All of us really need to be enraged about what has happened and what continues to happen through so many instances throughout our city," said Monsignor Damien G. Nalepa, pastor of St. Gregory the Great. "Racism, pure and simple, is a sin. Sin always exists, but we need to do all we can to eliminate and reduce it."

Monsignor Nalepa stood alongside Mayor Sheila Dixon at a news conference about the beating.

Bishop Madden has met with various city faith leaders this year about promoting peace and did so again recently. He said faith leaders want to meet regularly, discuss theological cause for further activism and support for faith-based groups on the ground.

"I think it highlights the need for people to work together," Bishop Madden said. "They can flood the place with policemen, but they can't do it by themselves. You have to have the community and the churches working together."

The archdiocese held a peace collection in parishes June 20-21 that brought in \$45,000 for Operation Safe Streets and other initiatives.

Meanwhile, an outreach worker for Operation Safe Streets, which partners with St. Veronica in Cherry Hill and Baltimore's St. Ann and St. Wenceslaus, was shot during a July cookout.

St. Wenceslaus will hold a peace walk Aug. 30 at 1 p.m. at the East Baltimore church. According to the church's pastor, Third Order Regular Franciscan Father Peter Lyons, the walk was organized by Safe Streets and churches and civic groups have been invited to pray for "peace in the face of increased street violence."

Officials want to forge a connection with the city's young people and strengthen relationships among urban youth ministers. Margaret Brogden, the archdiocesan coordinator for youth ministry formation, said the church can be an "effective agent" in the city.

"It's close to my heart because I grew up in the city in Cherry Hill," Brogden said. "I've worked in the city as a youth minister and I know some of the issues. Some of them were brand new to me because they weren't there when I was younger. I wasn't afraid of drive-by shootings when I was younger. These are the issues our kids are facing and we don't want to lose our kids to the streets."

[Click here](#) for a full transcript of Archbishop O'Brien's interview about the plight of Baltimore City.