

# Catholic Review Column: Let the Year of Mercy Start Now

May was the bloodiest month in Baltimore in some four decades, as 42 people were murdered in our city during those 31 days. It is not even mid-June and the violence continues as six more people were killed in Baltimore last Saturday and Sunday. As though this sad news were not disturbing enough, it has gotten worse as four children were shot this past weekend, including a 16-year-old girl whose body was found in a home that was set on fire. Police believe she was murdered before the fire was intentionally set.

City leaders and many in law enforcement, on whom citizens rely for their safety and well-being, have decried the violence and appealed to all sectors of the community for help in combatting what can only be called an epidemic.

Individuals, business and community leaders, churches and others in the nonprofit sector have also called for an end to the killings, which have increased dramatically since the violent protests following the death of Freddie Gray Jr. more than a month ago. They want to be a part of the solution to the underlying issues that are contributing to this murderous violence. And the Catholic Church wants to help advance the cause of peace while also finding practical ways that enable people to lift themselves out of situations that contribute to such violence.

One program that seems to be working is Operation Safe Streets, a program modeled after a similar one in Chicago called Ceasefire. Safe Streets - which has operated in multiple city locations, including St. Veronica Catholic Church in Cherry Hill and St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church in East Baltimore - relies on civilian "peacekeepers" to mediate street-level disputes such as drug-related turf wars before they escalate into violence. These men and women have the necessary credibility to effectively mediate such confrontations because many of them are ex-offenders themselves, and put themselves in harm's way without the protection that law enforcement officers have.

Safe Streets was recently hailed for helping to keep peace in Baltimore's Cherry Hill

neighborhood, which has gone more than 400 days without a murder. Our churches in these neighborhoods provide a neutral location for such mediations to occur, and provide necessary resources and support for the successful operation of the program.

In addition to Safe Streets, inner-city Catholic parishes have multiple outreach programs to provide parishioners and others from the surrounding community with such things as health-related services and adult education programs. Our Catholic elementary and high schools provide children and their families with their best hope for a way out of the poverty and violence that grips them; and Catholic Charities of Baltimore offers programs that include job training and case management in hopes of addressing core systemic issues that contribute to poverty. Partnering with our parishes are Catholic hospitals, which are deeply committed to the people of Baltimore and have long histories of providing outstanding health care to all residents, most especially the poor.

Just as we remain committed to continuing these works, we look to see what more we can do to establish lasting peace to our neighborhoods and dignity to our neighbors. After all, wherever we are in this archdiocese, these are our neighbors, our sisters and brothers, fellow children of God. It is easy for us to sit in judgment, to discount the violence, to block it from our minds and hearts as something that doesn't have an effect on me, my family, my friends. To do this would be to turn one's back on the very faith that compels us to show our compassion and our mercy to those most in need of it. Pope Francis reminds us every day, in countless ways, of the duty we have to our fellow man and woman, whom we seek to lift up through our prayers, through our goodness, and our love.

Let us not wait until year's end to begin observing a Year of Mercy. Instead, let it begin today.