

Catholic Review Column: The Urban Church

Earlier this week, Bishop Denis Madden, whose vicariate includes Baltimore City, and Spiritan Father Evod Shao, Pastor of St. Edward's Church in West Baltimore, led a prayer walk through the violent streets surrounding the parish. They were joined by a number of parishioners and others from the neighborhood who have recently watched the violence on those streets escalate. They prayed as they walked. They prayed for an end to the violence, for the return of peace to their neighborhood, for God's intervention and an end to the drug turf wars that often are the cause for the otherwise senseless violence that seems to be pervasive in the city that is the heart of our Archdiocese.

Others have led similar efforts. In fact, prayer walks have become a familiar scene in Baltimore of late. Ministers of other faith traditions have brought people together to pray on street corners, to canvass the city, and even to caravan to locations throughout Baltimore where murders have recently occurred.

People may ask what good prayer can do to combat such wanton, murderous violence. As people of faith, we believe it can do a lot of good. We certainly can't go out and arrest the drug dealers. But we can pray for them, and we can pray for their victims, for the families they are destroying, for the neighborhoods they are terrorizing, and the city they are intimidating.

Prayer is our greatest gift to our suffering city. But it is not our only gift.

The Church, through our parishes and the institutions, is at work every day trying to address the root causes of the violence that has a death grip on Baltimore, including drug addiction, pervasive poverty, access to quality education, access to quality healthcare, joblessness, and dismantled families.

Most all of our City parishes, including St. Edward's, provide food to nearby residents who are hungry through some version of a food pantry program. And at St. Edward's, Fr. Shao or a member of his staff will regularly ask a person who comes

for food what else he or she needs, what other adversity or challenge is preventing them from living with the dignity we all deserve as children of God. Many parishes also work with our partners in government and in the private sector to provide children with a place to go before and after school and where they can get free or reduced meals.

And parishes like St. Veronica's in Cherry Hill and St. Ann's & St. Wenceslaus in East Baltimore have served as places where neighborhood conflicts are resolved by people in the community who are trusted and who are trained to broker peace in sacred spaces that are often the only safe havens in communities infested with crime and violence.

Our churches even broker gun buy-backs in an effort to get weapons off the streets. Through the efforts of the late Msgr. Damien Nalepa of St. Gregory the Great Parish in West Baltimore and Fr. Peter Lyons of St. Ann & St. Wenceslaus, our churches have raised money to buy back guns that otherwise could be used to end the life of another.

Arguably, Catholic Charities' Our Daily Bread Employment Center does more than any one institution or agency in Baltimore to restore dignity to the hungry, addicted, jobless, homeless, and formerly incarcerated. Located across the street from the prison in Midtown, ODBEC often assists people coming from and going to prison, working both to prevent people whose lives are spiraling out of control from reaching bottom and to help those recently released from jail to establish lives of independence and fresh hope.

Our partners in Catholic healthcare provide charitable care to countless people in the City with little or no financial means. Through privately raised funds, children from some of Baltimore's poorest neighborhoods are able to attend our Catholic schools, which provide them both a quality education and a way to end the cycle of poverty that otherwise awaits them. And our Catholic universities have made tremendous investments in our city's residents and the neighborhoods they call home.

Of course, many of the problems that plague the city begin at home. Sadly, census data shows that fewer than 10 percent of Baltimore households consisted of a

mother and father and their children. There can be no mistaking the correlation between dismantled families and the social ills that begin at home and spread, en masse, to the surrounding community.

As we pray for an end to violence in Baltimore and other areas of our Archdiocese and our world, let us also pray for a strengthening of vocations to married life, for healthy marriages and families, and for the children they are responsible for raising in safety, in love, and in peace.