

New sexuality catechesis document aimed at youth

When it comes to human sexuality, many young people view the Catholic Church as an institution which dishes out stern looks and finger-wags on top of daunting edicts.

No one is more aware of that than the Archdiocese of Baltimore, which is following the lead of Pope Benedict XVI and the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops in attempting to reverse that line of thinking with the unveiling of “Created to Love.”

The 148-page document, shaped by the archdiocese’s Divisions of Youth and Child Protection and Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry, is divided into two separate packets for middle and high students.

“We in the Archdiocese of Baltimore are required to maintain a safe environment program for all children,” said Alison J. D’Alessandro, director of the Division of Youth and Child Protection. “The high school (document) is to be done in all schools, not just archdiocesan Catholic schools.”

It’s a tool designed for catechists and teachers that explains in detail the church’s sexuality teachings, addressing often taboo topics like pre-marital sex, masturbation and homosexuality.

The high school document aims to promote a healthy lifestyle through lesson plans addressing abstinence, decision-making, the sacramentality of marriage and relationship-building. The middle school document addresses healthy relationships/friendships and decision-making.

Archdiocesan officials hope the document will become the foundational, Catholic morality guide for archdiocese adolescents.

“Created to Love blends a child protection curriculum with the church’s teachings on human sexuality in an age-appropriate way,” Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien wrote in a letter to catechists, which is attached to the document. “This program is meant to support, not to supplant, the efforts already being made to educate young people

in understanding and appropriately expressing God's gift of human sexuality."

Informational sessions for catechists, parents and students were rolled out in the last month to what archdiocese officials say was positive reaction.

"Created to Love" puts a less prohibitive face on the church's long-held sexuality catechesis at the parish and school level. Kristin Witte, a co-author of the document and pastoral coordinator for the division of youth and young adults, said that was by design.

"It's not just that we should be forbidding them to do things, but we should be celebrating the fact that the church truly does believe we are created beautiful and we are created to love and we are created in God's image," Mrs. Witte said. "That's something that should be celebrated and talked about."

A touchy subject to introduce, sexuality often elicits snickers from young people and red faces for parents who often dread "the talk" with their children.

Scott Miller, Created to Love's other author, said sexuality discussions with young Catholic people are not something to fear.

"Our church's teaching about sexuality and our church's teachings about the value of a human person are so big and so wide," said Mr. Miller, the archdiocese's coordinator of adolescent formation. "Our church's teaching is a really big feast with lots of courses. Created to Love is the smallest little taste of that grand feast."

Human sexuality instruction has always been fraught with arguments over who should be doing the instruction.

Marissa Alspaugh was like any teenage girl when she attended Frederick County public schools. She had crushes on boys in class, but was nowhere to be seen when it came time for detailed sexual education.

"I was the kid whose mom took me out of these classes," Mrs. Alspaugh remembered. "I did not feel that I needed to know that, and I didn't care to know it either."

The only student in her class pulled from the program, Mrs. Alspaugh says she did not encounter scorn for her absence. Mrs. Alspaugh is now the youth minister of St. Timothy of Walkersville, and whenever the opportunity arises, she stresses the Catholic teachings of chastity.

“Sex is great,” she tells them, “but keep it in marriage. Love is a really good thing.”

She’ll begin to integrate the Created to Love lessons in May, when her youth groups assimilate new members. Before she ever addresses adolescents, she often reviews the church’s teachings with the parish’s parents first.

“They’re usually just so grateful that their children are hearing it from someone else,” she said.

What if, similar to Mrs. Alspaugh’s mother years ago in the public school setting, parents want to take their children out of Created to Love lessons?

“A parent can choose to opt out,” Ms. D’Alessandro said. “If they don’t want their children to participate, they don’t have to. We would encourage (participation) because we think it’s really important for children to have this education. We think it’s important for the parents to work together with the church to educate the children.”