

Providing a safe environment is everyone's duty

Editorial by Christopher Gunty

It's a tough time to be a young person. The number one movie in America pits young people against each other in a futuristic but not impossible to imagine society that culls the population by sacrificing youths from each region of the country in a bloodsport for the grown-ups to watch - and cheer.

At the same time, another movie hits the big screens in which the all-too-real terrorizing nature of teens against each other is depicted in a documentary. "Bully" shows the drama and tension that result when young people mistreat each other in ways unkind and downright cruel.

In Florida, a youth goes out for a snack and winds up dead at the barrel of the gun of a neighborhood watchman. A tourist visiting Baltimore's Inner Harbor is robbed, beaten and stripped by a mob of young people. Now a young man who was described as a "good kid" is charged with the crime.

Previous generations were not immune to such violence, on our streets or in our entertainment. Remember "Lord of the Flies," in which stranded students on a deserted island fended for themselves and descended into more primitive behavior?

These days, however, it seems that children and young people are exposed from every angle with unhealthy images of sex and violence at an impressionable age. They cannot be immune to this inundation; the same marketers who pay billions of

dollars to place their advertising messages to convince teens and other buyers to act cannot also claim that TV shows, movies and video games have no impact on their behavior.

We do well to recall Jesus' message in the Gospel of Matthew, when the disciples wished to keep the little ones from him: "Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked them, but Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these' " (Mt 19:13-14).

If it's part of our job to help such as these to get to the kingdom of heaven, then isn't it important to do all we can to keep them from harm? What can we do to protect them from violence and other threats?

In the mid-1980s, many dioceses around the country started waking up to the problem of sexual misconduct among the clergy and created policies and procedures to remove those accused from ministry. Counseling for those who had been victimized and treatment for the offenders were offered. The Archdiocese of Baltimore, under the leadership of Archbishop William D. Borders, was at the front of those developing such policies. But the message did not sink in everywhere until 2002, when a Boston Globe series shined a spotlight on cases there and across the country, prompting the U.S. bishops to develop a landmark Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.

A key to that charter is the establishment of training and screening programs for all employees of the church, and those who volunteer to work with children and vulnerable adults. Since it was introduced here, more than 90,000 people have been trained, not only to be clear in their own ways of dealing with young people, but also to be attentive to other adults in their interactions with youths. As Alison D'Alessandro, director of the archdiocesan Office for Child and Youth Protection,

notes in a Special Report in this edition of the Catholic Review, adults cannot expect children to shoulder the burden of protecting themselves and establishing boundaries. “Their safety,” she said, “really depends on being surrounded by adults who know how to prevent abuse.”

“Let the children come to me,” Jesus said. At the Catholic Center, in our parishes, in our schools, in all places where the church interacts with young people, we have an obligation to provide a safe place – from bullying and from abuse.

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