

Thawing the new evangelization

By George P. Matysek Jr.

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Father T. Austin Murphy didn't have to do much prodding to get a group of children to tell him the story of "Frozen."

Excited youngsters, some of whom said they saw the Oscar-winning film as many as five times, eagerly shot hands into the air to answer questions about Queen Elsa, Olaf the Snowman and other animated characters.

When the priest played clips during a special March 29 gathering at St. Luke in Edgemere, many of the children knew the dialogue by heart. One smiling girl even corrected Father Murphy's Baltimore-tinged pronunciation of the name of the film's heroine, Princess Anna.

"It's 'Ahh-na!'" the girl squealed.

The children, along with their parents, teens, married couples, clergy and young adults, made up an audience of about 75 who assembled for a first-of-its kind "Jesus Goes to Disneyworld" presentation.

A brainchild of Father Murphy, pastor of St. Luke and Our Lady of Hope in Dundalk, the idea was to get people thinking about the deeper messages in Disney films. In between singing along with "Let it Go," munching on pizza and welcoming an appearance of a parishioner decked out as Queen Elsa, participants explored the values behind the fairy tale.

The film's central message, Father Murphy said, was all about love. In fulfillment of a troll's assertion that "only an act of true love can thaw a frozen heart," Father Murphy pointed out that Princess Anna sacrificed her life for her older sister, Queen Elsa. In doing so, she discovered the true meaning of love - being willing to put others before oneself.

It's quite a Christian message, Father Murphy said.

Other Christian sentiments abounded: the notion that we are all connected, that marriage is not something to be taken lightly and that to love, we sometimes need to make ourselves vulnerable.

Whether Disney producers intended it or not, Father Murphy said, there was even a symbolic nod to Christian imagery near the film's climax when a character named Kristoff, a name which means "Christ-bearer," carries the Christ-like figure of the princess.

Father Murphy isn't sure if Disney has any agenda of advancing the Christian faith.

"It's an entertainment company," he said, "but, as with any good entertainment, there is truth that is always a reflection of the truth that ultimately flows from God." Father Murphy, author of a pop-culture blog, "Jesus Goes to Disneyworld," hopes his movie presentations spark conversations for families.

"The next time you see another movie, ask, 'What does my faith say about that?'" he told the families.

"Many of our young people get their values and their outlook on life from the entertainment they see," Father Murphy said. "Some of that is good, but some of it is pretty bad. Our faith has something to say about all that."

It seems to me that in a time when everyone in the church is buzzing about the elusive "new evangelization," Father Murphy is embracing it with gusto. New evangelization is about reaching out to people where they are, finding new ways to help them discover God in all aspects of their lives.

Father Murphy plans to make "Jesus Goes to Disneyworld" nights regular events at his faith community. Next on tap is "The Little Mermaid," and Father Murphy hinted that the evening might include seafood.

Count me in.

George P. Matysek Jr. is assistant managing editor of the Catholic Review.

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