

Web Exclusive Q&A about crime with Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien

In a story in this week's issue of The Catholic Review, Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien talked about the violence plaguing Baltimore City. Here is the full transcript of that conversation.

Catholic Review: From the moment you arrived as archbishop of Baltimore, you said that Baltimore City was vital to the future of the archdiocese. Why did you say that, and how is the city different than you thought?

Archbishop O'Brien: These things are hard to measure. The first thought that comes to mind is that the role of the church and the church leadership is to encourage those already at work bringing about a modicum of peace and progress in the city. I have been very conscious in all my dealings with priests and staff in the city to thank them and to let them know how much they mean to the church at large and to remain available to them. Throughout the year, I've been called on by pastors and other community leaders to be present and to speak up and lend my voice to theirs. I'm only happy to do it. How do you measure that? Has that brought about any results? Certainly not adequate results. We have to keep plugging, to keep trying, to keep employing new and imaginative ways to reach our goals to have some stability in our neighborhoods. We're a long way from it.

Catholic Review: When the summer began, you had a peace summit with other religious leaders and you were hoping this would be a summer of peace. How frustrating has it been to watch everything that's transpired?

Archbishop O'Brien: I hope some of it helped. It's safer in Iraq and Afghanistan, I think, sometimes. Still, there are good people out there patrolling the streets and taking an interest in the neighborhoods and sacrificing themselves for the youth in the communities. If not for them, it could be much worse. We have to look at the positive side too, if not for the generosity and the self-sacrifices of a lot of good people across the faith spectrum. Certainly in the Catholic community, you think about how much worse it could have been if they weren't doing their all. Their very

presence is 24 hours a day, seven days a week in the community. It's something that is very rare in the city. Many would come and go on Sunday. Our parishes are there for keeps and there for good. I'm just grateful we're not giving up.

Catholic Review: How important is it for surrounding counties in the archdiocese to take ownership of this problem?

Archbishop O'Brien: It's a real challenge the church must face and can face. We do have interrelated communities. Many in the suburbs and rural areas have roots in Baltimore City. We have to remind them of that and motivate them and create opportunities for them to contribute. Volunteers come in from the suburbs. We have a real task there. We had a peace weekend raise \$45,000 throughout the archdiocese. We'll analyze that, where there is support and where some support might be lacking. I think our priests are very conscientious. If we can give them the facts, they'll be able to tell the story more fully.

Catholic Review: Are there plans for another collection?

Archbishop O'Brien: We'll certainly talk about it. I would not be opposed to it if it can do some good.

Catholic Review: What do you feel is at the root of the drug and violence problems facing the city?

Archbishop O'Brien: It's all related. It's family life, it's education and lack of employment. The industry of the city is drugs, it seems. It's a vicious circle and we have to see how other communities have found a way to break that vicious circle because it's destructive. I don't think we've been very successful so far. Operation Safe Streets has because they've gotten those who were on the wrong side of the fence, back to a sense of responsibility and to help the community in a positive way. That is a great breakthrough. I don't think we should give up on that.

Catholic Review: How important are pastors and youth ministers in dealing with those at-risk?

Archbishop O'Brien: They are in the midst of the people and that carries a lot of credibility. They are sharing the burden, endangering themselves, giving up an easy

way of life in order to help other lives find their potential. Not only do they deserve our credit, but I think they are more effective than those of us who are talking about it and trying to deal with it from a great distance.

Catholic Review: How much does this summer violence motivate you to help find solutions?

Archbishop O'Brien: It's an ongoing effort. I'm sure we'll never be completely satisfied. We have family problems and drug problems in every community. It's important to realize that. It's a coordinated effort. We not only have our priest council, we have our sister council. We have the bishops meetings in their vicariates. We have all kinds of buttons to push. I think we need to keep the welfare of our communities on a priority level and listen to all parts of the archdiocese, see what suggestions there are, see what's missing we can supply, what the government can supply, as well as our private sector. I thought it would be easier to coordinate all of our religious leaders, especially in the city of Baltimore, but that seems to be a little difficult. There seems to be a lot of independence out there as part of the religious leaders. It's something we'll try to chip away on.