

# ON THE MOVE

## RAISING VOICES FOR EQUALITY

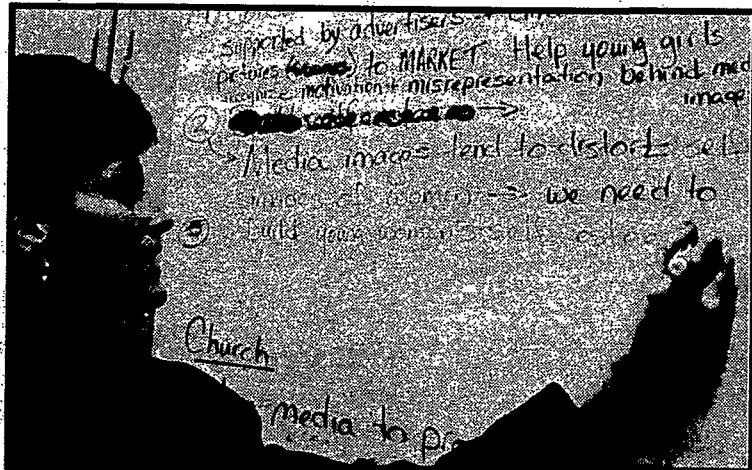
Media Messages and Values

Gender Awareness and Sexuality



Katie Vittozzi, 10, with mother Cathie, listens during a discussion at their parish, Church of the Resurrection Church, Perinton, Sept. 29.

Story by Mike Latona • Photos by Greg Francis



Facilitator Mary Ann Sloand writes girls' and mothers' comments and concerns during a discussion on media messages and values at Church of the Resurrection. The diocese sponsored a series of such "Listening to the Voices of Young Catholic Women" sessions.

One teenage girl claims the Catholic Church doesn't treat women as equals with men, stating, "Anything that discriminates against 50 percent of the world's population, I have a problem with."

Another girl becomes choked up as she recalls being sexually abused when she was 12. "Girls need more self-esteem and need to feel more in control, (to say) 'No, that's not what I want,'" she commented.

These Catholic teens are part of an 18-minute video in which they talk about the struggles they face in today's church and society. The tape, consisting of comments from eight girls who live in the Fairport area, was part of a new diocesan-sponsored program, "Listening to the Voices of Young Catholic Women."

Female teens, as well as adults, saw the video during six Thanks Giving Appeal-funded workshops around the diocese between Sept. 22 and Oct. 6. Participants also engaged in small-group discussions on six topics affecting young women: media messages and values; violence and abuse; experience of God and church; self-esteem; gender awareness and sexuality; and intellectual growth.

Gloria Ulterino, diocesan director for the advancement of dignity of women in church and society, said that future listening sessions are also being developed for Rochester inner-city residents. Once comments from all the workshops have been gathered, she said, her office plans to design educational programs addressing these issues.

Ulterino acknowledged that while some workshops were well-attended, others had only a handful of participants. For instance, although 16 people attended the Oct. 6 workshop at Mercy, no teens and only two adults came to a workshop the previous night at St. Michael's Church in Newark.

Ulterino said that attendance may have

is put it out there and try to invite people into the process."

Katie Adams, who attended an Oct. 6 workshop at Our Lady of Mercy High School, found the video "very informative," saying the teens' comments helped her "to know that I'm not the only one" experiencing some of these difficulties.

"Hearing them tell these stories, you see so much of yourself," said Katie, 17, a senior at Mercy and parishioner at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Irondequoit.

Kelly Hinds said she was so inspired by the video, she told everyone in her health class at Fairport High School about it.

"I thought it was really cool that I could bring (the information) back to school and people could say, 'I wish I was there,'" remarked Kelly, 18, who attended a program held Sept. 29 at her parish, Church of the Resurrection in Perinton.

Kelly added that she personally knows several of the girls who appeared in the video, and was surprised when some admitted they were sexually abused and/or harassed.

"They're quiet, so it hit me when they said that," Kelly remarked.

Workshop facilitators claimed that various national studies indicate that 70 percent of all teen girls experience sexual harassment in their schools, and 50 percent experience unwanted sexual touching. The presenters also claimed that the No. 1 source of injury to women in America is battering, and that self-esteem increases for males between the ages of 9 and 16 while it decreases for females in that age range.

In the small-group discussion on media messages, participants at Mercy agreed

been affected by the controversial nature of some topics.

"It seemed to me, from the people who came, that there was a lot of agreement in the stories that were told. But there were also a lot of people who didn't come," Ulterino said. "All you can do

that the ideal female portrayed on TV and in magazines is thin and usually blond. Audrey Smerbeck pointed out that adolescent girls suffer loss of self-esteem when they can't live up to these unrealistic standards.

"Girls get discouraged, but I'm sorry — we can't all be size 0 1/2," said Audrey, 14, a freshman at Mercy and parishioner at St. Louis Church in Pittsford.

Another major issue in the workshops, Ulterino noted, was whether women are treated equally in the church. Katie, for one, said she's frustrated by the fact that female altar servers have never been allowed in her parish — especially when she sees other parishes allowing them.

"I remember in fourth grade, all the boys were so excited about being altar servers. When I was younger, I would have liked to be one," Katie said. "It would be nice to be expected to do something other than bake cookies for the baked food sale — the stereotype."

On the other hand, Kelly sees signs of equality at her parish. She said she's been a longtime altar server, and that women frequently serve as lectors and eucharistic ministers.

"We actually have more women (on the altar) during the liturgy than guys," Kelly remarked.

However, she doesn't feel that total equality will be achieved until the Catholic Church allows women's ordination.

"We wish we could see women be priests, but that's never going to happen in my lifetime," Kelly said.

Ulterino said that Kelly's sentiments were echoed at other workshops. "We need to tell the leaders of the church that women have an equal place in the church," Ulterino said.

Ulterino added that males need to be educated about these many issues as well. In fact, she said that one workshop participant suggested that the video be shown at McQuaid Jesuit High School, an all-boys school.

"This is not just for women and girls, but also for men and boys," Ulterino emphasized.

Without this awareness, Katie said, males may not be sympathetic to the issues raised at the workshops. Currently, she admitted, she doesn't feel comfortable discussing these topics with males.

"I'd feel like, boom, right there I'd be judged," Katie said. "It's my own fault, but I'd be afraid of what they'd think."



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