

VIOLENCE

Continued from page 1

The idea that violence only affects those living in urban areas is a common misconception, as statistics from the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services indicate. In 2001, the latest year for which data was available, more than 2,000 violent crimes were committed in Monroe County, the most populous of the 12 counties comprised by the Diocese of Rochester. During the same year, 31 violent crimes were committed in Schuyler County, the least populous diocesan county. The statistics show that some form of violent crime — defined as murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault — occurred in all 12 diocesan counties.

The church teaches that all Catholics should be concerned about any loss of life due to violent crime, abortion or capital punishment, according to Jann Armantrout, diocesan life-issues coordinator.

"Catholic social and moral teaching gives us a guide," she said. "We're required as Catholics and as people to show each other respect."

Armantrout said the consistent-life ethic espoused by the Catholic Church requires respect for human life at all stages. If people tolerate one form of disregard for life — such as abortion or the death penalty — that disregard will carry over into violence and murder.

"We live in a culture that sees violence as more of a norm than the tragedy that it is," Armantrout said.

Deacon John Brasley and his wife, Belinda, recently moved to Rochester from Steuben County. Violence is more prevalent in their new neighborhood, and murders have taken place within a few miles of their house. Like many Catholics, they were frustrated by the violence occurring around them but didn't know what they could do about it. Then they heard about Deacon Coffey's prayer vigils and have been faithfully participating ever since.



Latanya Goodwin of Rochester mourns the loss of her sister, Danille, during a Nov. 26 prayer vigil outside the apartment in which Danille was murdered.

"We're really crying out to God for an end to the violence," Deacon Brasley said. "I think it's a really positive thing. The people in the area sometimes participate, sometimes from a distance, and sometimes join in the middle of a prayer. That can be very powerful, to see that people do care."

Deacon Brasley was recently named diocesan coordinator of jail ministry and sees a connection between his new undertaking and the violence that so frustrates him.

"I think that the jail populations are not always remembered by the larger church," he said. "Jesus told us that at the final judgment, that's one of the things we will be judged on is visiting those in jail or in prison. Maybe our church can help to end some of the cycle of being in jail and some of the violence."

Attending homicide prayer vigils is only one way for people to do something about the violence around them. The Rev. Karyn Carter, executive director of Families and Friends of Murdered Children and Victims of Violence, frequently attends the vigils. Her support group is in the process of launching "Everybody Deserves Justice," a campaign to develop an ongoing, coordinated effort through which a caring community can speak out against violence and will not be afraid to stand up for justice.

Members of the community often have information about homicides but don't go to the police because they are afraid or think their information isn't substantial, Rev. Carter said. Her group is trying to change that line of thinking and make people realize that each member of the community can help prevent violence and murder.

"I think we think that the police can do this alone, and that's sort of misinformation," she said. "People become immune and insensitive. We're trying to re-energize, re-motivate the community. That's somebody's child, that's another human being."

The group invites anyone interested in participating in the campaign to gather with clergy and local law enforcement at 10 a.m. on Dec. 6 at Full Gospel Tabernacle on Rochester's Clifford Avenue before driving to five recent homicide locations. At each location, participants will distribute posters with the victim's photograph and name and date of the homicide. Anyone with information will be urged to come forward.

Deacon Coffey and Rev. Carter are also sponsoring a community-wide candlelight service of remembrance at 5:30 p.m. Dec. 16 at Genevieve Baptist Church in Rochester.

The diocese is also convening a group to study ways the local church might be able to make a difference. According to Doug Mandelaro, diocesan spokesman, the group has begun meeting with representatives of several Rochester Catholic churches and plans to meet in the near future to continue discussion and form a plan of action.

Father Bob Werth, pastor of the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward, noted that many of the children in his parish grow up surrounded by violence. Adults, including the parish's youth minister and teachers at St. Monica's School, combat the culture of violence by teaching children how to treat each other and asking them to think about what Jesus would do in every situation they encounter.

"We're always, always working on it," Father Werth said. "It always comes up in conversation. We live it every day."

GENERAL

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