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ONE CATHOLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM ADDS "MEDIA LITERACY" TO CURRICULUM TO HELP STUDENTS BECOME CRITICAL CONSUMERS

DAYTON, Ohio — When some people are confronted by trash on television, they turn the station.

One person is trying to help turn young minds.

Sister Fran Trampiets, S.C., a national media literacy expert at the University of Dayton, has persuaded the Cincinnati Archdiocese to add media education to its curriculum in all 113 Catholic elementary and high schools in the Cincinnati/Dayton region.

Trampiets, author of Faith in the Media? (Ave Maria Press), a text on building media awareness skills for youth, conducts workshops on media education for teachers and catechists in the archdiocese and plans to use the pioneering efforts there as a model for other dioceses throughout the country.

"Young people are exposed to as much as seven hours of television a day," says Trampiets, who has taught media education for more than a decade at UD and throughout the country. "Add that to other communications — radios, CDs, computers, billboards, movies — and the number of messages they receive is staggering."

Bombarded with continual images of “causal sex, violence and rampant drug use,” young people often form a distorted value system, Trampiets explains. She says teachers must understand how the media work, how they affect our lives and how to use them effectively if their students are to become media literate.

“We live in such a media-saturated environment that media have been called the primary agents of socialization,” says Trampiets, assistant director of the University’s Institute for Pastoral Initiatives. “It’s vitally important that teachers especially understand the large role the mass media are playing in shaping young peoples’ attitudes and values, influencing their behavior and even changing the way in which they learn today.”

Teachers need to empower their students, Trampiets says, by teaching them to ask smart questions, to use media selectively and reflectively and to continually question the source and the source’s credibility.

“Media literacy is not media bashing,” explains Trampiets, who also is a consultant for the Center for Media Literacy in Los Angeles. “It’s developing the ability to access, analyze, interpret and evaluate information from a variety of print and electronic sources, and the ability - over -
to communicate effectively through a variety of media.

“Our goal is to empower young people,” continues Trampiets, who has spoken on the subject at the request of the White House. “It’s helping students understand the craft of media production so they appreciate the good stuff and to know when they’re being fed crass commercialism.”

For example, the underlying message in a typical shampoo commercial is that to be beautiful and successful you must use the product, Trampiets says. The obvious truth: a bottle of liquid soap adds little to appearance and nothing to your chance of success in this world.

“When we use the media we have to ask who’s shaping our values and beliefs, and to what extent are we becoming a consumer society,” Trampiets heeds. “What kind of faith and spirituality are being developed as a result of the media? Is it a spirituality that values human dignity or is it a superficial view that sees us only as a customer?”

In addition, teachers need to know how to use instructional media in the classroom, because so much of it is a part of their young lives, says Trampiets.

“The Internet opens up all kinds of possibilities for children — good and bad,” Trampiets explains. “Teachers must know how to use multimedia because the rate of change in education is phenomenal. The electronic media are so much a part of their world, it has to be part of their learning environment as well.”

When young people become media literate, Trampiets says, they have the tools to understand the media in a business context. “Once they realize what advertisers are trying to get them to do, young people aren’t so susceptible to manipulation.”

Carol Adamson, a seventh- and eighth-grade social studies teacher at St. Peter Catholic School in Huber Heights, Ohio, completed Trampiets’ workshop in August. She taught a unit on media propaganda using the recent elections as a case study.

“My students looked at campaign commercials and wrote and produced their own video campaign commercials,” explains Adamson. “I then had them write about propaganda they found in the commercials and how they used it in their own ads.”

Adamson agrees with Trampiets, that young people are the constant targets of media manipulation. But she is encouraged that they can become media literate.

“I’ve already noticed a difference in my students,” she says. “They no longer believe everything they see or read.”

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