

Informing our readers means not shunning the dark facts

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"In a chillingly frank account, a former Roman Catholic priest who served in the Stockton Diocese recently described his decadeslong career as a pedophile, including his sexual tastes and how he groomed his young victims for abuse."

So began a story on Oliver O'Grady that ran on The Bee's front page 10 days ago.

The story went on to describe, in some detail, how O'Grady molested an estimated 25 children while serving parishes in our area.

The detail, as it turned out, was too much for some of our readers, including Linda Vermeulen of Ripon, who e-mailed us complaining not only about that story but about coverage of Michael Jackson's molestation trial as well.

"What is the purpose of such a graphic and disgusting description of (O'Grady's) molestation accounts?" Vermeulen wrote. "I was sickened as I read it, and couldn't help but wonder how this detail serves the readers of The Modesto Bee.

"The most dishonorable part of your piece was where he tells the reporter how he lures a child to come to him. I couldn't help but feel the sorrow and revulsion of the hundreds of child molestation victims who must have been reading the article in horror. Shame on you."

I'm sure many of our readers were shocked and even repulsed by O'Grady's own account — as well they should have been. And, it might have opened old wounds among other readers.

Our intent in publishing the detailed account was to help readers — especially parents — better understand how pedophiles operate, and thus how better to protect children. The vast majority of teachers, pastors, coaches and other youth workers are good and honorable people; at the same time, there are sick and twisted people among them. Parents and children alike need to be alert. And to be alert, they need to be informed.

That's where The Bee comes in.

One of the roles of a newspaper is to capture and chronicle life, in all its beauty as well as its ugliness. Another is to give people information they need to make intelligent decisions in their daily lives.

Put those two together and you have this: Since much of what happens in life isn't pretty, so much of the news isn't pretty. That doesn't mean we don't need to know about it; to the contrary, the more we know of even the darkest details, the more able we are to take action to make our community and world a brighter, better place.

Not everybody agrees with that. With some frequency, I hear from friends and fellow people of faith who feel strongly that the newspaper should focus much more on the good and much less on the evil in our world.

Each time that happens, I'm reminded of a meeting I had a number of years ago with some local pastors. At one point, one of them noted that ministers and journalists were both in the news business.

That's true, but with one important difference: Preachers are called to proclaim the "good news," while journalists are charged with proclaiming the news, both good and bad.

That doesn't mean the two can't be connected. I was reminded of that recently when I came across a quote in a devotional guide.

"Sometimes I pray the news," the Rev. Vikki Matson wrote, "holding in my heart people who need healing, comfort, courage. Praying in response to news stories allows me to enter the world of another, to offer them to God, and it prompts me to do what I can in my circles to make this world more peaceful."

Whether they're religious or not, people need to know what is going on around them, as disturbing as it might sometimes be. Only then can they decide where to focus their thoughts and prayers, and energy and effort to make their world a safer, brighter, better place.