

Future of the Christian School

The Courier-Journal strongly believes in the necessity of the survival of the Catholic school system. Recognizing that there is controversy about present and future values of the parochial schools and that nearly half of the Catholic children of the diocese attend the public schools, we support Monsignor Roche's duty to inform the diocese frequently about the problems of our schools' future. —The Editor.

By MSGR. WILLIAM M. ROCHE
 Diocesan Superintendent of Schools

Very little has been done to date to make the needs of Catholic education specifically familiar to the average Catholic parent. We need action: if we are being priced out of the field, we should be working for increased aid for Catholic schools; if parents lack knowledge of the problems faced by Catholic education, they should be out asking questions.

Why have so few of the laity been doing these things? The answer is relatively simple: they haven't identified with the problems of Catholic education. They mentally associate those problems with someone else. "They are not our problems, they never have been. The problems are theirs."

Who are they? And how did they happen to come upon these problems? They are the pastors and the principals, the hierarchy and the teachers and the administrators. They are the parents who can't get children in, who object to tuition payments, who dislike marking procedures, who believe that their children are treated unfairly, and who roundly object to pastors and bishops asking for money to support this gigantic system of schools.

How did it get this way? There has been fault on both sides: they have traditionally spoken of my schools, my parish, my parochial school, my classroom while we have objected to their policies in running their schools.

Whenever you have the we's and the they's the battle lines are already drawn. The sooner we forget this pettiness, the sooner we shall solve these problems and open the door of our schools to more of our children. The schools we are discussing are our schools. The children we have in mind are our children. It is not worthy of us to sit motionless until these children are irrevocably harmed. So first, let us discover what the problem is; second, let us do something about it.

It is a basic philosophical principle of Christianity, that education belongs to the parent. Although all Christians, both clerical and lay, give lip service to this proposition, very few act as though they believe it. Admittedly, the family cannot provide an adequate education for the child to meet the problems of today's complex industrial society. But look at the parents who expect the school to assume all of their responsibility.

Let's focus more sharply on our problems. Catholic schools have been in existence in this country for more than 100 years now. That would seem to be long enough to give a sufficient experience in education to understand its purposes and its limitations; it should give a certain historical perspective and it should be the fullness of time for a restatement of the aims, the methods, and the goals of Catholic education.

Our 100 years of experience tell us, first of all, that Catholic education is eminently practical. Perhaps we can add that it is most practical when combined with the genius of our beloved democracy. It is certain that Catholic education has been both a cause and an effect of the full flowering of the Church in America. As a matter of fact, it has been a cause much more than an effect of the dramatic evolution of the Church from a struggling, missionary body in 1850, to its security and self-respect in 1950.

On hundred years is quite enough time to trace the progress of the Catholic school — to see it develop from the isolated, one room school of the frontier to the network of sophisticated institutions which it comprises today.

Secondly, history points out that Catholic education benefits the nation as a whole. Education is a matter of self-preservation in a democracy. Many signs tell interested observers today that the time is close at hand when the American people will recognize in full their debt of justice for the public service of private education.

This recognition has already begun. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 guarantees the inclusion of students in private schools in the additional programs being drawn up for those having grave educational needs. It gives to them library books, textbooks, and audiovisual materials, and it insures their future by giving to private school administrators the mandate to cooperate in the planning for innovations in education.

As we implement the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, our eyes are raised from the immediate tasks before us, as pressing as these are, and we are forced to consider the prospects for education 10, 20, even 30 years from now.

It is critically urgent now as never before, that our educational systems be geared to satisfy the needs of children growing up in an age where 10 years means the difference between the first experimental Sputnik, and the exploration of the moon!

As we move into the age of massive federal aid, all of the educational agencies of the community will be brought more closely together in



the spirit of cooperation which fostered the writing of this law. As President Johnson so well stated, we must keep our eyes on the child, and we must use our ingenuity to see to it that the needs of the child are satisfied. If we cannot do it, the federal government will, for these needs cannot be denied. The school that performed satisfactorily in 1950 is struggling to keep up today. A school that is barely abreast of today's developments will be worthless in 1970.

There are prophets of doom among us; those who say that we cannot meet these gigantic demands, that the role of Catholic education has been played out. For them, there is nothing left worth fighting for. And this attitude, I respectfully submit, is not worthy of the spirit of dedication and sacrifice that has been characteristic of the American Church. Now is the time to accept the challenge of the government — to take the funds which have been so providentially offered to the children, and begin the process of re-tooling for tomorrow.

Those who are prone to think that these are the final days of Catholic education are still clinging to the pastoral concept that sees the parish as a self-contained unit, an isolated island of spirituality in today's materialistic society. But again, I respectfully submit that this concept is not worthy of the vision of men like John Lancaster Spaulding, James Cardinal Gibbons, and Bernard McQuaid. These men were pioneers, not conformists. These men were revolutionaries. If they could move mountains to attach a school to a parish that was an isolated island of spirituality, certainly we should be worthy of the task of modifying traditional structures to meet the needs of our complex, highly mobile society.



Historians writing about Catholic education in the 20th Century, will point to the 60's as the era in which it became evident that the parish was no longer capable of supplying all of the educational needs of its children. In that sense, it is true to say that the system of Catholic education born of the councils of Baltimore has fulfilled its purpose. But we have as great a need of Christian education today as did the Catholics of a century ago.

It is true that our society, our notions, are more sophisticated today than were those of 100 years ago. But we are faced with the reality of weakened family life, with the resultant weakening of the moral fibre of our youth. The work of the Church is therefore hardly over. But the work of the parish-operated school is about over.

Either the school will bankrupt the parish which attempts to keep it abreast of modern demands, or the school which is confined to the narrow limits of the parish's ability will be slowly strangled until it is no longer a significant force in the community.

The school must be removed from parish administration, its financial base broadened by the use of federal, state, and local funds, so it can continue to perform a function totally in harmony with the continuation of this democracy.

We have the doctrine of the Separation of Church and State to contend with. And before anyone, friend or foe, can accuse us of trying to use the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or any legislation, to weaken this doctrine, let us assure

them that we are as convinced of its vitality as were the Spauldings and the Gibbons and McQuaids of old.

We are perfectly content to listen to the common sense expressed by our fellow Americans when they say that teaching the dogmas of sectarian religion is a private affair. But we feel that our children must have an education which unashamedly teaches them sound moral and spiritual values, which teaches those professing Christianity that God is the Creator and Redeemer of the world, and which goes beyond the exigencies of mere human convention to point out the tenets of the moral law.

Let the term "parochial school" die a sudden death. It denotes a limited education which fails to embrace the global view. And it connotes a provincialism which places pride of ownership above the good of the child. The centrally-administered, publicly-financed schools of tomorrow will be Christian public schools.

In placing Catholic schools under the authority of a diocesan school board, as more and more bishops are doing, it becomes obvious that education is a community concern, and highlights the growing importance of lay participation in school administration. More and better liaison with the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine will complete the picture of unity of administration and singleness of purpose.

On the other hand, federal aid is not the total answer either. Most Americans do not look forward to the creation of a super-government agency to run the schools or perform any other function. The federal government furnishes services which state and local governments cannot perform. In some states this may well be the complete support — or nearly so — of the state system of schools. Consequently, it is still a function of state and local government to provide support for the Christian public schools in proportion to their contribution to the common good.

Unlike the case of federal support, however, the case for state support is not so easy. State constitutions have been written to explicitly discriminate against private schools. This is a direct outgrowth of the bigotry of certain Protestants in mid-19th Century. That is an historical fact — not something that we are grudgingly accusing our Protestant neighbors of today. But the fact remains, and something must be done about it.

The most sensible thing to do is to change those discriminatory state constitutions which prohibit equal support of Christian public schools.

Let us use all means at our disposal — and the best means are at the polls — to change discriminatory state constitutions so that all of the young citizens of any state may be given an equal opportunity for a decent education.

Catholic parents can be served best by a Christian public school system under the administrative control of a diocesan school board, composed of professional educators, clergy, and lay people from all walks of life. Local Catholic school boards could be concerned with the operation of single schools, or of central schools serving an area; boards composed of teachers, pastors, and lay people — whose most meaningful contribution is not \$5 in an envelope on Sunday, but rather a giving of themselves to help solve the problems of educating their children.

This system of Christian education can operate beside and in harmony with the neutral public school system.

Their day-to-day maintenance and operational costs should be shared by state and local governments in proportion to their public services, so that opportunities are equalized for all.

This task will take great effort, and it is not work for priests. It is parental responsibility. So I say to parents: don't be afraid to be involved in the operation of the school your children attend. You belong on the planning councils. Don't expect your schools to prosper without the benefit of the talent God gave you. Progress does not happen automatically. Only you can make it come about.

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