

The Case for Christian Private School Education

Articles about Catholic education rarely present specific praise or defense for the private Catholic high school. There are no parochial or diocesan high schools in the Rochester Diocese. The 13 Catholic secondary schools in this area, enrolling 10,300 students, are owned and directed by religious communities of men and women. But the problems of financing and questions about preserving them are as crucial as those touching the parish school system.

Father William O'Malley, Jesuit Father, faculty member at McQuaid High School, Rochester here presents the first of two articles in which he discusses the distinct "educational difference" and "religious difference" achieved in the training of a Catholic high schooler. These differences are so desirable, he contends, and so necessary for the future laity, Catholic high schools must not be allowed to close. — The Editor.



FATHER WILLIAM O'MALLEY

By FATHER WILLIAM O'MALLEY, S.J.
McQuaid Jesuit High School

With everything from morality to the Church to God turning up in the obituary columns, it's no wonder people are already beginning to keep over the expectable demise of Catholic high schools.

1: Our high schools are, nearly by definition, eternally broke. They are forced almost monthly to all kinds of genial extortion like bazaars, magazine drives and cookie sales to keep their noses above the flood. (It would almost be worth closing them down just to keep those kids with chances away from the doorbell.)

2: To the casual observer they are ostensibly no more efficient educational institutions than their public counterparts. They use the same teacher-training schools, the same curriculum, the same texts. Gone is the somewhat more trustworthy mathematics text with Jesus on the frontispiece, instructing the temple teachers.

3: Their graduates do not seem recognizably more religious than the graduates of Brighton, East Monroe or any other area high school. Although it would seem hard to tell without a survey, many claim that "they" are "all" becoming, if not impious, at least non-pious.

If all these things are true, are we in point of fact continuing to subsidize a fossil? Is the financial-homage we pay our high schools as maudlin and sterile as a yearly donation to landscape a cemetery which keeps good Catholic corpses away from less desirable ones? After all, we have de-ghettoized.

Gone are the simple days when I was 6 and poor little Protestant Caroline Isbister suggested that babies came from their mummies' tummies. Then we, staunch Romans all, suspecting this to be just one more ugly heresy spawned in the public school, took up stones to throw at her. But those days are gone with our innocence. And so, let us hope, has the divisive, un-Christian, protected ignorance we equated with innocence.

We need no longer be defensive. We've had a Catholic president (who never went to a Catholic school). The per-

ennial role of suspected underlying has long since passed from the Catholics and Jews to the Negroes and Puerto Ricans. What we are has rubbed off on America, and America has rubbed off on us, and we are both the better for it.

Martin Luther King has proved that a man need not be Catholic in order to be holy and right. Gene McCarthy and Flannery O'Connor have proved that Catholics are not necessarily uncritical "slaves of Rome." Even the Klan and other covens of the unthinking no longer believe Catholics are cannibals because they eat the Body of Christ, nor do we suspect that everyone with a Masonic ring had to spit on the crucifix to get it.

If, then, the only purpose of the Catholic secondary schools was to preserve us from pluralistic contamination; we'd better close them down and stop wasting our money. If they are, on the one hand, always screaming for more cash and yet, on the other hand, are doing nothing specifically different from the public schools, we ought to shutter them up and start taking advantage of our school tax dollars. After all, a man who pays both taxes and tuition does so because the extra cost pays for an extra dividend.

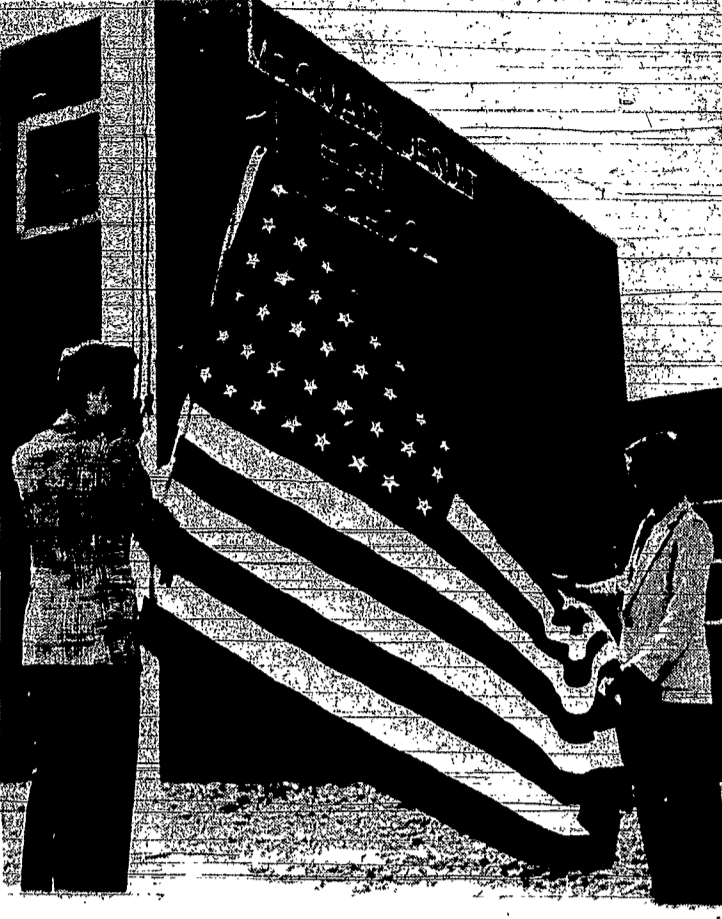
Since lack of money (1) is indisputable, we owe it to ourselves and our families who nurse nickels to provide Catholic education to ask if (2) there is in point of fact something educationally more desirable about a Catholic secondary school and (3) there is a real religious difference in its graduates.

When most parents give reasons for sending their children to private schools, the usual ones have little to do with the actual curriculum. Of course, some uninformed people choose Catholic schools as the only alternative because they envision the public schools as Grand Guignols where teachers can be stabbed in the throat without causing too much stir in the front office and where the level of instruction is only one or two steps up from baby sitting. Of course this is absurd, and yet lay teachers and students who have transferred from public to private schools do recognize some strong differences immediately.

These differences all satellite around the different atmosphere in a private school: tighter discipline, more individual attention to students, tougher requirements for promotion and control over a student's every one's mind—a tinge of status.

These differences, too, can be overdramatized by our friends. We no longer have Orwellian control over a student's every thought and movement as we might have had in the halcyon days when Sister Glumhilda littered the classroom with broken yardsticks. But we do try, frequently with some success, to internalize the need for discipline and to make students see that self-control is usually more human than legalism-plus-cops-and-robbers.

I think one can say that discipline is stressed more pervasively in a private school than in a public school. One paradoxical result of this is that we teachers become personally more involved with the students. If we feel responsible for the way they act in and out of



Citizenship as well as religion.

school, they are less likely to become rarer educators, and we can see them more as persons, growing clumsily and beautifully.

At times students resent our intrusion on their freedom, but a good many begin to see the need for order, compromise, cooperation, consideration for others in human life: not an inconsiderable benefit.

Overenthusiastic friends also overstress the personal attention private schools can give. Our buildings are not honeycombed with cosy nooks where student and teacher can challenge one another man to man—though we're working on it. But we do have smaller student bodies, and therefore a higher likelihood that most of the faculty will know many more students than they actually have in class. Moreover, simply because of our lack of money, we have fewer miracle media machines to get between student and teacher.

But most important of all, a private school where religious men and women teach is not just a 9-to-4 school, not just a Monday-through-Friday school. The teachers actually live at the school. They are there and available every day, all day. These are "unfocused" people; they have no children of their own who demand and deserve a certain intensity of inalienable attention, emotion and being-with. All this we religious have still available for all the kids who come and ask for them.

Because we are freed from our own families, we can be more available even than the student's own parents.

Our educational standards are really no tougher than those for any public high school honors class. What makes us different, perhaps, is that we spread these higher academic demands over a larger area. We make greater demands on the student who is "merely average," and as a result over 95 per cent of our student bodies continue their education into college.

Because some of our schools are not subject to the Regents exams, we can vary the curricu-

lums as the needs and interests of these particular students seem to require. The academic freedom of a private school is no small advantage over the lesser latitude allowed in public schools.

Finally, in the Catholic secondary school we do have a common heritage, a common foundation, to set as a matrix in which student and teacher can synthesize, focus and interrelate ideas.

In the public schools, this matrix is usually supplied by our common heritage as Americans but, even if in some schools the common background is broadened to an international scope, the area of synthesis is restricted to only the social, political level.

It cannot penetrate more deeply to the common humanistic background even of a philosophy, much less of a theology. It cannot fit areas of learning into a consistent worldview, whether it be Judeo-Christianity or existentialism or communism, without running the risk of violating someone's civil rights. As soon as a public school teacher begins to teach a cohesive system of ideas as an overarching frame of reference for each new idea, there is some Madeyn Murray waiting to haul him into court.

In the Christian private school both teachers and students work in the context of a common philosophical and theological background which all of them at least basically respect.

However, many critics—students as well as adults—do consider this a highly constricting disadvantage because they feel this synthetic world-view is

forced on unsuspecting students, whereas they should instead be allowed to discover their own individual philosophies.

In the first place, we no longer catechize our students and demand automatic and uncritical conformity to "the Christian tradition." I would imagine that there is in Catholic school classrooms more vocal and more continuing controversy about basic human and religious commitments than there is in any public school classroom, no matter how liberal.

The teacher in the Christian private school has a philosophical and theological commitment. He would like his students to share it, but he will not force them to accept it, for the simple reason that he cannot. No matter what he can get a student to write on an exam paper, only the student himself can give or refuse a commitment or even know for certain that it actually has been made.

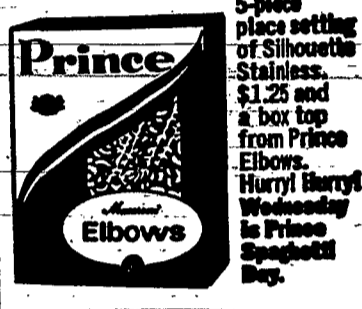
But this does not mean that the teacher surrenders his views to the whim of his class. He defends them, and in so doing gets across something that no public school teacher is allowed to do and no once-a-week CCD teacher is able to do, with or without his own personal commitment, at least the student has a consistent matrix of ideas from which to differ if he wishes or which he can even reject for another.

The students who are denied this unifying principle, like children whose parents refuse to influence them regarding religion, will eventually have to face all the alternatives when they come to the age of philosophical and theological decision and will have no criteria or predilections or experience by which to judge any of them. As a result, they can sit before all the equally appealing and repelling doorways and enter none.

Private schools do, therefore, have educational advantages: a greater concern for self-organization, more chances for personal contact, more pervasively demanding academic standards below the honors level, and a unifying world-view in which one can see the relationships of each new idea with everything else.

And those who believe that the Christian private school offers no more than religion classes over the general public school miss a great deal of the point. At the very least, we have a great many of the advantages of the expensive private school at about one-third the cost. Students who attend them are all, equivalently, on two-thirds scholarship. These schools do not have all the advantages of Choate and Exeter, but they don't charge \$1,500 a year either.

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Deaths

John G. Maier
Mass for repose of the soul of John G. Maier, 56, of 334 Kings Highway St., Irondequoit, was celebrated Tuesday at Christ the King Church.

Mr. Maier, operator of the August M. Maier-Funeral Home, Joseph Avenue, suffered a fatal heart attack on Jan. 17, 1969, while at the wheel of his car.

He had operated the funeral home since the death of his brother, August M. Maier, four months ago. His father, the late John E. Maier, established a funeral home bearing his name on North Street.

Mr. Maier attended St. Andrew's Seminary, Franklin High School, and the Simons School of Embalming in Syracuse. He was active in many Catholic organizations.

Surviving are his wife, Margaret (Hess) Maier; three daughters, Sister Fides, SSJ, and Sister Immaculate Conception, Ithaca; Mrs. Frank (Margaret) Keane of Abington, Mass.; and Miss Joan Maier; three sons, John B., USN, Robert G. and Michael M.; two sisters, Mrs. Ernest (Antonette) Muson and Miss Dorothy Maier; a grandson, and several nieces and nephews.

Henry Werth
A funeral Mass was offered Jan. 15 for Henry Werth of 273 Terrace Park.

Mr. Werth died Jan. 13, at the age of 55. He was in the exporting business.

Survivors include his widow and two children, Donald and Jean; two brothers, Leonard and Robert; a sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Reilly, and several nieces and nephews.

Mrs. Hetzel
A requiem Mass was celebrated Jan. 4 in St. Joseph's Church, Penfield, for Helen Melsenzahl Hetzel of 107 Bunker Hill Dr.

She died Dec. 31 in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., where she and

Volunteers Sought For State Hospital
The Red Cross is looking for volunteers to help with social activities at the Rochester State Hospital.

The appeal is aimed especially at retired men and women, because daytime help is needed. Mrs. William T. Harper, chairman for this service, said it included planning parties, games and hobby groups, and taking book carts through the wards. Song leaders and musical performers would be welcome, she added.

Interviews will be held next week at the Red Cross building, 276 South Clinton.

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By Father Jan

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