

Catholic Schools — Reason, Rhetoric and Purpose

The following is a digest of papers prepared by Dr. Padraic O'Hare, parish education organizer for the diocesan Department of Education, on the status of Catholic schools today.

Catholic Schools: the Third Council of Baltimore directed parents to support them under serious obligation; a former President of Harvard called them a divisive element in American life; some Catholics hold them to be synonymous with a strong American church; and other Catholics think they are a stumbling block in the progress of that church.

Today, the American Catholic Church has gotten into setting priorities; and Catholic schools are as good an example as may be available for determining what issues are involved in church prioritizing.

People of good will, faith and intelligence disagree on priorities. In this discussion, I want to explore several of the questions which are raised when the issue of the place Catholic schools have in the mission of the church comes up.

When people sit down to set priorities, they usually begin by considering how the thing is working. But measuring the effectiveness of something is not the first step in prioritizing. The first step is to uncover the nature of that something.

So, as a preliminary to our discussion of the Catholic school issue let us not defend or attack the performance of the schools but examine the rationale of Catholic school education.

Theologically, the idea that educational formation is directly related to religious formation is rooted in Catholic Tradition. Catholic schools are the concrete

manifestation of the will of the people to encourage the total initiation of the young into the spirit, values and practice of the Faith. Educationally, the schools are an attempt to extend or to maximize the impact of the Christian community on the total learning experience of the young.

To clarify the politics and rhetoric which surround the "Catholic school issue" we may highlight the best and the worst aspects of the arguments for and against the efforts of the Church to maintain a school system.

The basis of the argument is a different interpretation of the same reality: the Church. The question asked is "How effectively Christian has American Catholicism been?"

The question is intertwined with judging the value of Catholic school education because, during the period of its development up to today, immense amounts of the Church's personnel and monetary resources have gone to support the school system.

Critics of the system claim that the schools once served to preserve the Catholic identity, as well as nourish the American identity of our immigrant forebears. But, they say, the Church is called to a greater ministry to the world and to engage fully in American cultural life. The preservation of the schools, then, hinders this greater ministry and participation.

They further note that exhausting the resources of the Church in the preservation of the school system is inconsistent with the burgeoning Adult Education movement in religious education.

Supporters, on the other hand, hold that American Catholicism has a vitality and spirit rare in the

Church's history and in any culture, and that this spirit developed through the Catholic school system.

Supporters will note that the full participation of the American Catholic in the life of the secular community cannot be purchased at the price of a loss of identity. An unambiguous sense of our history and our spirit as Catholics is at the heart of making an effective religious impact on society. The preservation and enhancement of a group identity as Catholic is what the school system is all about, they say.

They further note that quality Catholic schools are indeed contributors to the Adult Education movement.

With each of the arguments it may be important to recall Bishop Joseph Hogan's words at this year's Chrism Mass: "One parish, however well organized, is not the Church; one movement, however effective, is not the Church; one ministry, however well done, is not the Church! We must reaffirm very strongly that the reason for many gifts is not to do one's own thing. The reason for many gifts is not to do one's own thing. The reason for many gifts is, as Paul tells us, "so we shall all at last attain the unity — the unity inherent in our faith." And so we continue to in-

vestigate new forms of ministry and as we continue with much needed experimentation, we must always have the courage to use this as our evaluative norm. Our goal is maturity in Christ. Nothing else will do! And only those means that bring us to this kind of unity and maturity must be kept. Even in blessing the oil of Chrism which is used as a means of unity, the Church prays: "Most of all, Father, make all of your Church grow until it reaches the fulfillment to which you are calling us, in Christ, our Light and our Life forever."

It seems to me that the nature of education should always be spoken of as having two functions: both to serve history and today; both to serve the culture and the person; both to pass on a tradition and create a new world.

When education loses its concern for preserving tradition, transmitting the cherished values of our people, it leads us down the road of destruction.

And when education loses its concern for the person it produces, in John Stuart Mill's words, disciples rather than inquirers, or in George Leonard's words, trickles rather than torrents.

In the fundamental meaning of the word sacrament, we could say

that a Catholic education is the Sacrament of Humane Education. That is, it serves to reintensify appreciation on the part of all peoples for their histories and is deeply appreciative of individual person.

It is with this understanding that the Church approaches setting its priorities, especially in regard to Catholic Schools.

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THE OPEN WINDOW



Fr. Louis Hohman

Dear Father Hohman,

I have been reading in the Courier-Journal about the beginnings of the Diocesan Pastoral Council. I know that it consists of about 60 priests, sisters, brothers and lay people from all over the diocese (about 30 lay people?) I also know that it is thought of as the broadest based advisory body the Bishop will have. The theory of it sounds great — something long overdue in the Church, but... My question is this: how can 50 or 60 people meeting a few times a year really and truly advise the Bishop in any meaningful way? How can they get to all the facts which will be needed? How can they come to any kind of meaningful agreement on anything, being such a large number of people? I would like more than anything to see it work but at this moment I am in a "wait and see" condition.

Sincerely, A. M.

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