

The School Ministry and the Urban Poor

Through the gracious enlightenment of God's Spirit, the Catholic people have grown more intensely aware that no aspect of their life as a church and as a people can be carried on, least of all blest, unless the joys and hopes of the poor and alienated are seriously encountered and addressed in our pastoral planning.



The closing of the Catholic schools conducted by the Council of Inner City Parishes (C.I.C.P.) in the Spring of last year, together with the difficulties encountered by central city parishes which seek to sustain the service of a Catholic school for their families, are serious indicators of crisis.

I have taken preliminary steps to address the difficulties of our Catholic schools which serve the city and the urban poor, and I wish to share these developments with the people of the diocese.

For the last several months, my Vicar for the City of Rochester, Monsignor George Cocuzzi, and the staff of the Diocesan Education Department have worked to create a process for addressing the difficulties of the Urban School Ministry. They have placed before me and some of the key leadership of the diocese a PROPOSAL FOR STUDY of new (or additional) forms of financing, clustering and administration of urban Catholic schools. More important, the proposal envisions a careful study of the theological rationale, pastoral outreach and distinctly urban character of schools in the city.

This proposal is not a plan. The experience and expertise required to develop a rational approach to the problems of urban Catholic schools, as well as the principles of co-responsibility in the Church, dictate the broadest possible involvement of the members of the Church, leadership and people, in this planning.

Far from being a completed plan, the Urban

School Ministry Proposal provides a mechanism for studying and making decisive recommendations for the future of Catholic schools in the City of Rochester, and will hopefully serve as a model for such planning in the other urban areas of the diocese. In pursuit of this goal, I have convened an Episcopal Task Force, composed of laity, urban clergy and other parish staff, representatives of Sisters' congregations, representatives of our Black and Hispanic communities, and members of the diocesan departments.

The work of this Task Force will not substitute for or pre-empt parish, regional and consultative bodies' efforts to chart the future of the schools.

Indeed, the recommendations of the Task Force will have to be deliberated by parishes, regions and consultative bodies.

My own reflections on the idea of an Urban Catholic School System are these:

As I have said before, I am committed to and supportive of the ministry of Catholic Schools. My commitment, however, to this or any form which the Church's educational, liturgical and social justice ministries takes at the present time is the commitment of the open, hopeful and free Christian: all ministerial programs are subject to the correcting grace of the Spirit and all ministerial programs exist in a church which is responsible for many forms of service.

I know that the Catholic schools, in addition to providing a rich religious formation for children can — indeed must — affect parents, and neighborhood, serving as an occasion for deepening the religious life of the entire community.

What I do not wish to preside over, is the continuing evolution of our Catholic schools exclusively into schools which can afford the high cost of operation.

Unchecked, this development will rapidly create a situation in which one whole area of Church ministry will be unavailable to the economically poor.

It is for this reason that I said in my Pastoral, "As a community we must arrive at a method of continuing the schools that offer their services to the poor."

Therefore:

* I believe we must look at the possibility of such a system.

* I believe that such a school ministry would have to be a unique program and the staff would have to mirror a deep evangelical concern for the variety of problems of the urban poor.

* I believe that such a ministry would have to take the form of a system; that is, parishes agreeing to work together for a Catholic School Ministry, rather than clinging tenaciously to a parochial school.

* I believe that such a ministry must be assured a certain minimum longevity, putting such a system into operation and seeing it die for want of prudent planning, can only deepen the despair that afflicts many of the urban poor.

* I believe that such a ministry is not possible to achieve without the spiritual and monetary investment of many Christian leaders and people.

* I believe that such a school system must have a goal to reach out beyond the students it serves to parents and, indeed, to community.

In their Pastoral Letter on Catholic Education, the American Catholic Bishops said, "The unfinished business on the agenda of Catholic Schools . . . includes the task of providing quality education for the poor and disadvantaged of our nation. Generous, sustained sacrifice is demanded of those whom God has favored in order to make available educational programs which meet the need of the poor to be self-determined, free persons in all areas of individual and social life."

It may be that a future for schools which serve the urban poor hinges on the willingness of the struggling to help the desperate. We know, as Christians, that our authentic discipleship of Christ depends on our response.

Mother's Day a 'YES' to Life

On occasion, the Courier-Journal reprints homilies which we feel should be shared with the diocese. This Mother's Day sermon by Father John P. Norris, pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church, has been chosen because of the timelessness of the message.

We are celebrating today — on this second Sunday of May — two liturgies — both depicting strong concepts, strong symbols, strong images. The Liturgy of the Word brings to mind the concept, the symbol, the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. The Liturgy of the world brings to mind, the concept, the symbol, the image of motherhood. There is a strong temptation on my part to ignore the one and concentrate on the other (the religious one). Probably because I am a coward at heart. I have always felt a bit uncomfortable about talking on or about Mother's Day (this is the first time in my eight years at Blessed Sacrament that I have got "caught" with the homily assignment!). Basically, it is because I am afraid that the whole concept, symbol, image can so easily be treated in a spirit of maudlin sentimentality. Somehow or other Mother's Day almost forces me to think in terms of an Edgar Guest poem or brings to mind the picture of Whistler's gentle lady sitting still in her chair or the sweet, white-haired elderly female who smiles benignly from candy boxes and bread trucks and Norman Rockwell covers. And maudlin sentimentality does not become me. But neither does it become the concept of Motherhood.

If I may be personal for a minute, my own mother died when I was age 16, the eldest of three. Perhaps, as a result, I have grown up with a truncated, unfulfilled concept of Motherhood. My memories of her in no way engender thoughts of sentimentality. As are all mothers, she was a good woman. But I don't remember her as being overly-tender or affectionate. She was certainly not over-protective or overly sympathetic. The point is — I do remember her — with love — and hopefully can identify with every child's memory of his or her Mother, past or present.

A HOMILY BY FATHER JOHN P. NORRIS



Motherhood, as I suggested, is a strong concept, a strong symbol, a strong image. We recognize that in the very language we use in our culture and symbol systems. We call earth our Mother — Mary our blessed Mother — the church our holy Mother — and the school we went to our "alma Mater". The strength of a Mother, it seems to me, is based on one fundamental truth. A Mother is one, par excellence, who says "yes" to life. That is a pretty important concept for all of us to ponder today — not only the fact of saying "yes" to life but the how of saying "yes" to life.

It was Mary's "yes" to life in response to the Angel Gabriel that started the wheels turning on the most beautiful story of love the world has ever experienced — the story of the Incarnation and Redemption. It was a "yes" spoken in the midst of very difficult circumstances — against her own announced wishes about her future, in a situation which could easily, and did actually, bring about confusion, shame and some guilt feelings within a small community. It was a "yes" that had to be constantly reaffirmed as she watched her son grow in

his own-creation, away from her, greater than herself. It was a "yes" that ultimately had to be choked out in grief as she stood by the cross and received his lifeless body into her motherly arms. It was a "yes" that took another direction, at God's will, when she was told to look away from her first born and say "yes" to bringing new life to other sons and daughters — "Woman, behold thy Son."

All of us, mothers and others, in view of the tragic scenes happening in our world, even in our own community, need to reflect on this willingness to say "Yes" to life. The physical fact of bringing a child into the world evokes many implications for us generally. It brings to mind the need we have to review our attitude about sex — that life is the beautiful fruit and natural fulfillment of sex as God intended it. And we should learn to address this whole delicate subject from this point of view — not with the guilt, shame, fear and ignorance with which we usually surround it. We should be concerned about good instruction in the subject, both for our youth and perhaps for ourselves no matter what stage of life we are at. We should be concerned about necessary support systems, when saying "yes" to life becomes difficult for a particular individual. That is why we should be involved in the Right to Life movement and in Birthright — or concerned about such intrinsically related topics as world hunger, justice and peace.

In addressing mothers directly, I would like to remind you, by your very title, that you have already indicated this willingness to say "yes" to life. But it is equally important that you constantly reaffirm it — as Mary had to — in order to let new life develop as its own eventually, perhaps even grow away from you, perhaps greater than you. Mary worked all of this out in a spirit of faith and trust. That ultimately became her crowning glory — next to Motherhood. As her cousin, Elizabeth, put it — "Blessed is she who has believed!" It is within this same context of faith and trust that Mothers, and all of us, can fulfill the "yes" to life that each of us has an obligation to speak.