



Photo by Joan M. Smith

Dwayne Brooks, Chris Welling, Dewanna Scott, Kisha Clark and Patrick Cannon learning weights and measures in Mrs. John Rigney's fourth grade class.

Sense of Mission

By Father William Barrett

We've all heard about the missions. Chances are, most of us have supported the missions at some point in the past year. We may have given our dollars to feed children in Asia or to build a school in Africa, or to support a particular missionary order. We give through several "special" church collections for the missions each year, such as the Propagation of the Faith and the Bishop's Relief fund.

And, as we all know, there are missions at "home," too.

We can think of health care workers in sparsely populated rural areas of the U.S. or missionaries working with derelicts in a large city. The list could go on and on.

I'd like to tell you about a mission right here, in our own diocese, that might surprise you.

It's the mission of inner city Catholic schools.

Now wait, you might think, how can a Catholic school be a "mission?" After all, we all know Catholic school students — who generally do not live in poverty — and we are all familiar with well-established, well-financed Catholic schools in our own parishes or regions.

But inner city Catholic schools are a little different.

The story of our Catholic schools, here at St. Augustine and St. Monica, is one of the untold stories of faith right here in our own diocese.

About 20 years ago, many middle income persons, including many Catholics, began to leave Rochester. This phenomenon is what the sociologists call "white flight." Middle-income persons left for suburbia, for green fields, new homes and fresh air.

About 15 years ago, the pattern was becoming very clear: within a very short time, there would be relatively few Catholic families with young children left in our parishes.

Why, then, have Catholic schools? Why struggle with all the financial headaches associated with Catholic education for only a few families? These were tough questions, begging for hard answers. Could we find the answers?

Yes. With God's help, we made some important — and unusual — decisions about 10 years ago.

We simply threw open the doors of our schools to everyone.

We threw our doors open to people looking for faith, whatever their own religion or lack of religion. We told these parents of our own beliefs and our own hopes for the Lord. We told them that their children would be exposed to the traditions of Catholic doctrine and faith if they attended our schools. And people of many religious backgrounds — and, in some cases, of no religious background — walked through those open doors.

We threw our doors open to people who were poor. We told them that, as central city churches, we had little money. We told these parents they would have to pay substantial sums of money for their children's education (our families pay between \$500 and \$700 a year). And these parents sacrificed for their children, and they, too, walked through our open doors.

We threw our doors open to parents who were disenchanted with public schools, whose children simply found school too hard and were not learning.

We told them that they would find our Catholic schools even harder, but we told them that, in the midst of our rigorous academic program, these children would find dedicated and loving teachers — teachers who cared. And these families, too, walked through our open doors and their children began to learn. The results of our standardized achievement tests prove this.

Here at St. Augustine and St. Monica, we're serving people who would normally not have any contact with a Catholic school — and probably not even with the Catholic Church.

When each of our students walked through our open doors for the first time, he and she encountered dedicated, caring teachers, high academic expectations, and, often for the first time in their lives, the presence of Christ in the classroom.

Our schools became a reflection of the Church to them. That's why we call our urban Catholic schools "missions."

Over the past 10 years we've served almost 2,000 students at St. Augustine and St. Monica. Will these students become involved in the Church as they move through life? Will our students make significant contributions to our city and our world in the future?

Frankly, we don't know.

All we know is that 2,000 students have walked through our doors, and we've dedicated each and every one of them to Christ. The Lord will do with each of our students what He wills.

Today, students are still walking through our open doors. We are still struggling to provide the best Catholic education possible to these children. We're helped by scores of dedicated parents, donors, and volunteers. Every one of these dedicated people — from the single parent who raises several hundred dollars for the school every time we have a candy sale, to the caring parishioners who stop in to check the heating system each day — are in love with our work and with our students.

Love, after all, is what the missions are all about.

If you walked through the corridors of our schools, you would see crucifixes and statues, children's artwork on the walls and lots of smiling.

If the urban Catholic school missions are full of love, they're also full of smiles. And in every smile we see a bright future. That's what makes our work in urban Catholic education worthwhile.

Schools Are Part Of Dramatic Change In Urban Ministry

By Joan M. Smith

What do St. Simon Stock Elementary School in the Bronx, and St. Monica's on Genesee Street in Rochester have in common? They are part and parcel of the dramatic change in inner-city private elementary schools.

St. Simon's, which is in a neighborhood of burned-out buildings and high crime, and St. Monica's which is in a neighborhood that had its troubles in the 1960s, are experiencing academic renewal, enrollment upswings, and community support. And they are not isolated incidents in the revitalization process.

According to a four-year research project conducted by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, the inner-city private elementary schools, despite financial difficulties, deteriorating buildings, and decreasing proportions of teaching nuns and brothers, have managed survival in which neighborhood is the key word. No longer parish schools serving only the Catholic portion of a community, the inner-city private schools have evolved into neighborhood schools, open to all faiths, cultures, and academic achievement levels.

The League study, which sampled 64 schools in eight cities, reported 56 percent of the students in the target schools were black, 31 percent were Hispanic, 8 percent white, and 5 percent were members of other minorities. It also reported that one-third of the students were non-Catholic.

The researchers also said that inner-city private schools succeed not by taking the cream of the crop but by emphasizing socialization and creating a distinctive education. Based on the

study's analysis, the researchers concluded that the schools serve the same community as their public counterparts and that they are "remarkably egalitarian."

"The schools," the report continued, "have principals who provide strong and effective leadership, disciplined environment which the teachers find conducive to learning, and well defined goals: to provide quality education integrated with religious and moral values." And that is St. Monica's.

In 1956, at the height of the golden age of the Catholic elementary school, St. Monica's student enrollment was 1,200 pupils. Afterwards, in the full flight of suburban migration, it slipped into the low hundreds. Today, enrollment is steadily climbing, with 250 pupils currently benefiting from a full range of education and creative programs. There is the pre-school, all-day kindergarten, and hot lunch programs. Under Title I the school has a remedial math and science program conducted by two teachers provided by the public school system. Also provided by the Rochester School District are a nurse, social worker, psychologist, and speech therapist. There is also a music and art program.

St. Monica educators have not ignored the technological age. There are plans for computer programs in the curriculum. The main goal, however, is learning the basics and this is done in a contained school room environment.

Sister Mary Ellen Cragan, SSJ, principal, said education has gone full cycle. It has gone from structured classrooms, to student grouping according to ability, to allowing each

student to progress at his or her own pace; and is now returning to the structured self-contained classroom. And this is what parents want — "a flexible training environment in a controlled setting," Sister Mary Ellen said.

Another important factor in the comeback of the inner-city private schools is that parents are supportive. The League study found that parents make financial sacrifices to keep their children in the schools because they believe they offer superior education and expose their children to religious and moral values.

At St. Monica's the children's faith is respected but they also share in the Catholic faith heritage through daily religious instruction and by attending liturgies. According to Sister Mary Ellen the parents affirm this.

Another contributing factor to parent interest is that parents acknowledge the school as theirs. They are encouraged to be a part of the daily routine of the school by visiting classes to observe what their children are learning, and their input is sought on matters such as the school budget.

Parents, pupils, teacher and administrative personnel are determined to make the inner-city private school a viable neighborhood educational center. The fact that the pupils can walk to school is a plus, according to Sister Mary Ellen. "Parents send their children to a school within walking distance where they have a rootedness," she said. And it is this "rootedness" which shows in the attitudes of the pupils who, attending St. Monica's, feel they belong not only to a school but to a neighborhood.



Quiet lessons are the order of the day in Mrs. Brown's class.



No need to prompt pupil concentration when they are tuned in on video lessons.