

Inner-city Catholic education: Whose mission is it?

By Teresa A. Parsons

One of the most controversial options presented in the Urban School Study is a proposed Catholic elementary school designed primarily for non-Catholic children from low-income, minority families. The proposal to consolidate St. Monica's, St. Augustine's and Corpus Christi schools into one program has been described as "insulting" by some and by others as yet another retreat from the inner city.

Although that particular option does not appear in the subsequent Catholic Elementary School Plan for the City of Rochester; the issues on which diocesan consultant Alan Taddiken was focusing attention remain unanswered.

What does it mean to provide a Catholic education to a non-Catholic student body? Who should benefit from such an effort? Who should support it? What kind of ownership can non-Catholic parents and the surrounding community have in a parochial school? And, as one pastor has phrased it, will the people in the pews buy into it?

Under the provisions of the Catholic Elementary School Plan proposed by diocesan education officials, a task force on multi-cultural programming would be appointed to examine these questions. Building on the strengths of existing non-parishioner schools, the task force would be asked to strengthen and better define such programs and determine who should be served by them. Other projected task force goals would include working toward more racially balanced enrollment, identifying a wider base of support for the schools, and reviewing the assertion that urban parochial schools weaken public schools by drawing away the most qualified students.

In Monroe County, the average Catholic elementary school serves 16 percent non-Catholics, according to the Urban School Study, which was conducted for the diocese by Taddiken, a consultant for the Center for Governmental Research. In the City of Rochester, however, the average school includes 31 percent non-Catholic students. And the percentage in some individual city schools is as high as 90 percent.

During the last 20 years, as Catholic families in great numbers followed a general middle-class movement toward the suburbs, minorities — blacks, Hispanics and Southeast Asians — have become majorities in some urban neighborhoods. Viewing education as the only means to a better life for their children, many minority families sought in the Catholic elementary system an alternative to disappointing neighborhood public schools.

Meanwhile, the pool of school-age children has dwindled steadily. In Monroe County, non-public schools lost 19.9 percent of their enrollment between 1972 and 1984. The results were seen most dramatically in Rochester's inner city, where seven Catholic elementary schools — St. Bridget's, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, Holy Redeemer, Immaculate Conception, St. Lucy's, St. Francis Xavier and St. Michael's — were closed.

That list of parishes is also familiar as the membership of the now defunct Council of Inner City Parishes (CICP), an organization formed in 1971 to help save Catholic inner-city schools. As the financial outlook for the schools grew increasingly bleaker and the need for other types of urban ministry increased, the CICP voted to close its remaining three schools in February, 1975, and later that year voted to disband.

Many parents, teachers and principals felt betrayed and left out of that decision. And as the black bishops of the United States

pointed out in their 1984 pastoral letter on evangelization, "What We Have Seen and Heard," far more than money was at stake. Catholic schools are "one of the chief vehicles of evangelization in the black community," providing an opportunity for quality education and character development and acting as a sign of stability in often chaotic and fluctuating environments.

"Cost effectiveness can never be the sole criterion for decisions regarding the continuation of a Catholic school in the black community," the pastoral asserts. Nor, it says, should those decisions be made without the involvement of the entire black community and the Church community.

In compiling and writing the Urban School Study, which was based on reports from schools and parishes, Taddiken admitted it was difficult to define a "non-parishioner-based" school. The study provided quantitative measurements for three of the clearest examples — Corpus Christi, St. Monica's and St. Augustine's — by describing whom these schools educate as well as the costs and obstacles the schools are facing. St. Monica's serves 90 percent non-Catholics, Corpus Christi, 82 percent and St. Augustine's, 51 percent. All three schools confront what Taddiken termed "potentially serious financial, enrollment and class-size problems" and occupy facilities with "long-term operation and maintenance problems."

Corpus Christi is the only school in the diocesan Catholic elementary system that has made its non-parish status official. In 1977, Corpus Christi Parish decided it could no longer support a school. But the school survived because parents, many of whom were affected by the demise of the CICP, came forward to create a strong steering committee. They asked for and received time to find the money to keep the school open and also obtained diocesan permission to incorporate separately from the parish.

Corpus Christi Parish still owns the building, but does not directly support the school, which pays for maintenance and basic operational costs. Parents work closely with the principal, Sister Eileen Daly, to operate the school and raise funds.

The black bishops used evangelization as one argument in favor of providing Catholic education to non-Catholics in the inner city. Although they stressed that schools must be "thoroughly Catholic in identity and teaching," they must evangelize by exposure and not coercion. "In a particular way, this means that faculty, administration, staff and students will by their manner of life, bear witness to gospel values," the bishops wrote. "In this way not a few — as experience has shown — will freely choose to investigate the Catholic faith and seek fellowship within the Catholic community."

Taking much the same view, Sister Eileen prefers to call what happens at Corpus Christi School a sharing of faith. She refused to justify her school's existence by trying to produce "converts."

"Was the gospel message 'Go teach ye all Catholics?'" she asked. "These kids are converted — they are already Christians. And they are less afraid to talk about God or to pray out loud than most Catholics."

Nevertheless, what's taught at Corpus Christi are Catholic Christian values and doctrine. And most parents wouldn't send their children if they didn't view that teaching as affirming, rather than threatening, their own beliefs.

Jamilah Sabree, a parent of two Corpus Christi students and member of the school board, believes Catholic education reinforces the principles her sons learn in their own church. "As long as they believe, that's what really matters," she said.



'What We Have Seen and Heard'

A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization From the Black Bishops of the United States

In their pastoral letter, "What We Have Seen and Heard," the black bishops of the United States called the continuation of Catholic schools "the touchstone of the local Church's sincerity" in evangelization.

Above all, Sabree appreciates the personal relationship between teachers, parents and students. "Every day, I know what's going on with my boys," she said. "I know their teachers will call me if anything comes up."

Very few school parents are members of Corpus Christi Parish, but Sister Eileen believes the ministries of school and parish remain closely intertwined.

"We are a very viable sign of the Church's commitment in this neighborhood," she pointed out. "The neighborhood is affected when a kid in the neighborhood makes better, stronger decisions."

"You're going from the narrowness of parishioners to neighbors. This might be the kid who helps you on the street sometime or cuts your grass," she said.

Like Corpus Christi, St. Monica's School has established a strong neighborhood presence. In contrast to the predominantly black student body, the parish congregation is mostly white and has a large percentage of elderly people.

Unlike Corpus Christi, St. Monica's School and Parish remain directly linked. The school buildings are owned by the parish, which provides a subsidy of 11 percent of the total school budget.

"It really is a community school already," said Father Robert Gaudio, who became pastor last June. "There are only 8-10 families from the parish there. Some people have said 'Didn't you close your school?'"

Although Father Gaudio acknowledges that the press of financial considerations has created tension within the parish concerning support of the school, he views that as a good sign.

"The fact that we are wrestling with this tension in our lives is a healthy thing," he said. "You can't just throw it out — you've got to learn to juggle it."

"If you look at the buildings and the costs of maintaining them — the finances — you say 'We're a poor parish' and you start acting like a poor parish," Father Gaudio said.

"But we're also rich. Actually we're one of the richest parishes in the diocese if you focus in on the richness of our traditions ... A lot of people are held by the tradition — the parish and the school hold good memories for them," he said.

"And we're right where the Church has always been — where it's a challenge to the community."

Gaynelle Wethers, St. Monica's principal, is a living advertisement for what is happening at her school. She chose Catholicism as an adult because as a child the Sisters of the Holy Family gave her and other young black women in New Orleans the opportunity for a Catholic education.

"They evangelized me by providing a school, a positive self-image, by helping me develop my leadership skills," she said.

Part of the evangelization she offers at St. Monica's is a recognition and affirmation of "the black Catholic Christian experience."

"There's a richness in that culture that's not being explored," Wethers said. Although she views a school with a balance of races and cultures as ideal, reality dictates that where white culture is present, it is dominant. "We're absorbed into white culture and values," she explained. "We are evangelizing by helping people respond to whatever they're called to be as Christians."

"I would be very disappointed if the diocese didn't see this as a priority," she added. "Catholic schools were there to help the immigrants from all other nations. They should be there to help us become empowered as well ... The Church has the opportunity for a great reconciliation here — to become the focal point of parents, community, and Church, all working together."

But when all those groups work together, ownership becomes an issue, especially when the non-parishioner school retains its parish ties. Non-Catholic parents may be deeply committed to the school, but may feel excluded from the parish/diocesan decision-making process. That was a frustration voiced by a parent from St. Augustine's School, which has received diocesan approval to close at the end of the current school year.

"Shouldn't there be some credit for being in the system over time?" he asked.

St. Augustine's School may be a victim of ambiguous identity. With 51 percent non-Catholic students, it demonstrates what many consider a perfect balance of minority and non-minority students. The school can also claim a principal widely recognized as excellent, a dedicated staff and a supportive pastor. But in the last five years, St. Augustine's has lost 52 percent of its enrollment.

At St. Monica's and Corpus Christi, something happened to coalesce parents and the community as their neighborhoods changed and their parishes became less able to support a school. But a cohesive neighborhood response may not have happened at St. Augustine's for the same reason the parish is less financially able — the neighborhood is changing too rapidly.

Whatever the underlying reason for its decline, St. Augustine's illustrates the difficulty of creating and maintaining a thriving urban Catholic elementary school and of defining and measuring its "success" in tangible ways.

"I operate this place on faith — a lot of faith," said St. Monica's Gaynelle Wethers. "And God hasn't failed me yet."

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