

Convention challenges parents to 'do more than bake cookies'

By Karen M. Franz

The fourth-annual convention of the New York State Federation of Catholic School Parents was a challenging occasion — starting with its somewhat rebellious theme and progressing to presentations on subjects ranging from redesigning Catholic school philosophy to designing development projects.

Led by President Jean Gilbert, the Rochester chapter of the 14-year-old parents' organization sponsored the May 1-3 gathering at the Rochester Plaza Hotel. On the flyleaf of their convention journal, local organizers offered this explanation of their theme, "Do More Than Bake Cookies": "We cookie makers, volunteer basketball coaches and classroom painters cannot just send in our children ... and our baked goods for the monthly fund raiser, as important as those activities are.

"We need to become more knowledgeable about our parental roles. We need to learn for ourselves what our educational system is and should be about, and to use that knowledge to participate in the development of policies for our schools. We need to take leadership in deciding the fate and the funding of our schools, and to challenge our Church leadership to broaden the base of its financial support, just as it calls for the broadening of public support through tax credits."

Drawing delegates from all eight dioceses of New York state, the convention was highlighted by the luncheon keynote address delivered by Father William O'Malley, SJ, longtime teacher at McQuaid Jesuit High School. Father O'Malley began his speech — "What Makes a Catholic School Catholic?" — by acknowledging his "delight in asking dandy questions." He proceeded to provide ample evidence of that proclivity.

His opening foray was the rhetorical query, "Why do you waste all that money sending your kids to Catholic schools when you can get as high SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores in the public schools?" Dis-

cipline and pre-college training that will lead to "upwardly mobile" careers are oft-cited reasons for registering children in Catholic schools, the Jesuit educator noted. Yet, he remarked, such goals do not provide reason for the existence of Catholic education; its purpose, rather, is to make apostles of its charges.

Father O'Malley further noted that — when asked — many of his students have defined being a Christian as not hurting others and being nice. "How does that differ from being a good Jew or an ethical atheist?" he volleyed again. "Students think that Christianity equals morality. Christianity has nothing whatever to do with morality, except insofar as Christianity presumes morality," he observed.

"One has to be moral in order to be human. Once you're at the level of humanity, you may hear the call to be Christian," he asserted. "Christianity does not ask us to be un-bad, it asks us to be holy," in the sense of being whole persons. Most teenagers, however, would prefer to be called various defamatory terms rather than to be termed "holy" by their peers, he said.

"The symbol that embodies the whole meaning of Christianity is a statue of a corpse," he quipped. Yet "most middle-class kids have been shielded from the fact that suffering is natural, necessary for growth and inevitable."

"The call of the Christian is to be used, especially by the unworthy. We have an authority higher than all of the popes, than all 2,000 years of the magisterium that tells us that the only question that will determine whether your life was worth living is: 'I was hungry, thirsty, I was the one they called nerd. What did you do about it?'"

Ever the educator, Father O'Malley concluded his talk by offering delegates a test by which they could determine whether their schools were really Catholic. Among the questions were: Are there more kids in service projects than there are on the varsity teams? Does the school conduct retreats

within its athletic programs? Are retreats meaningful or just "touchy-feely" sessions? Are all of the faculty members good apostles?

In two of the convention's 13 workshops, Leonard Fine presented delegates with two concepts some will consider nearly revolutionary — a pre-paid tuition plan and his belief that the survival of Catholic schools depends upon the establishment of development programs. Fine, assistant superintendent for business management with the Catholic school system of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, noted that the common reaction to rising tuition costs and shrinking student populations is to plan fund-raising activities. Echoing the convention theme, however, Fine asserted that "bingo and fund raisers aren't commitment, they're busy time. Commitment is standing up and saying 'This is my institution.'

"Fund raisers are OK, but they're immediate relief for emergency situations," Fine remarked. "They must not be confused or substituted for development programs."

He outlined for delegates a step-by-step method for creating a school development plan, emphasizing repeatedly that appeals for money are the last step in a multi-stage project. "We want to attract people (to the school) first, money second," he said. "We need first to get an investment of time and effort before we start thinking about money."

The groundwork — which focuses on determining the school's philosophy and developing a realistic five-year plan — will

take 18 months to three years. Only when that work is accomplished can workers write a case-study document, which becomes the tool of funding campaigns, Fine said.

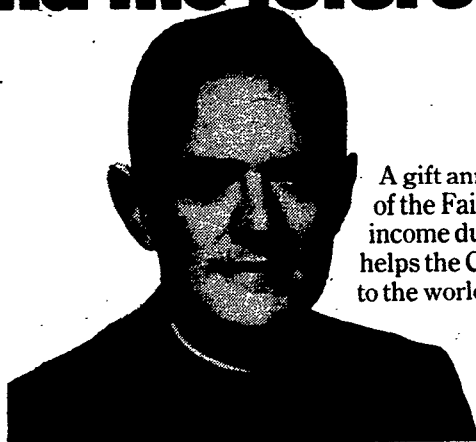
The primary requirement of development is that all parties concerned — from the school parents to the bishop — understand their objectives and are committed to both Catholic education and development.

In another session, Fine discussed New Orleans' program by which parents pay the full year's tuition when they register their children. Bank officers are on hand during the registration to process pre-approved, low-interest loans for all interested parents. For an eight- or nine-month loan at the current rate of 9.75 interest, parents pay only \$44 in interest charges over the course of the school year, and the schools have steady cash flow and funds to invest. Moreover, if financial circumstances change within a family, the school can refund the tuition money to the bank, paying off the family's debt.

"It's the only tuition-collection program that's never had a failure," Fine observed, noting that all parties involved — the banks, schools and parents — are satisfied with the program.

Other convention highlights were Mary Elizabeth "Tipper" Gore's presentation on the effects of suggestive rock music on teenagers; an overview of New York state services to the students of non-public schools; and sessions on the Regents' Action Plan, drug abuse, public relations, parent-child communication, effective meetings and lobbying techniques.

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