

Faith lessons learned without parish school

By Stephanie Batterman
Guest Contributor

One of the most important lessons I learned as a child in my home parish — St. Mary's in Bath, Maine — was that a community needs a dream. All the years I was growing up, St. Mary's Parish wanted to build a Catholic school. This was the dream, the goal, that united and energized the whole community. All the community's activities — to say nothing of money — went toward achieving this ambition. We knew who we were and what we wanted. Nothing could stand in our way.

Our greatest fundraising effort was the annual parish fair and baked-bean supper. The whole parish was mobilized. We planned for months, phoned every member or former member for assistance, built booths, baked, cooked, and served. Our fair and bean supper was famous, and people came for miles around. Our pies were wonderful. Our beans, baked for hours in pits, were mouth-watering. We had a great time and made money toward our building project.

Finally, after years of effort, we built our school. The trouble was, in completing our goal, we had lost our purpose. We no longer seemed to know who we were or what we were supposed to do with our time and energy. Our school was only open for a few years. It's hard to say what went wrong. Maybe we hadn't really been committed to the school — just to the process of building it. Maybe we had functioned too long without a parochial school. Maybe we didn't have enough money or expertise to run a school. Or maybe we had learned over all

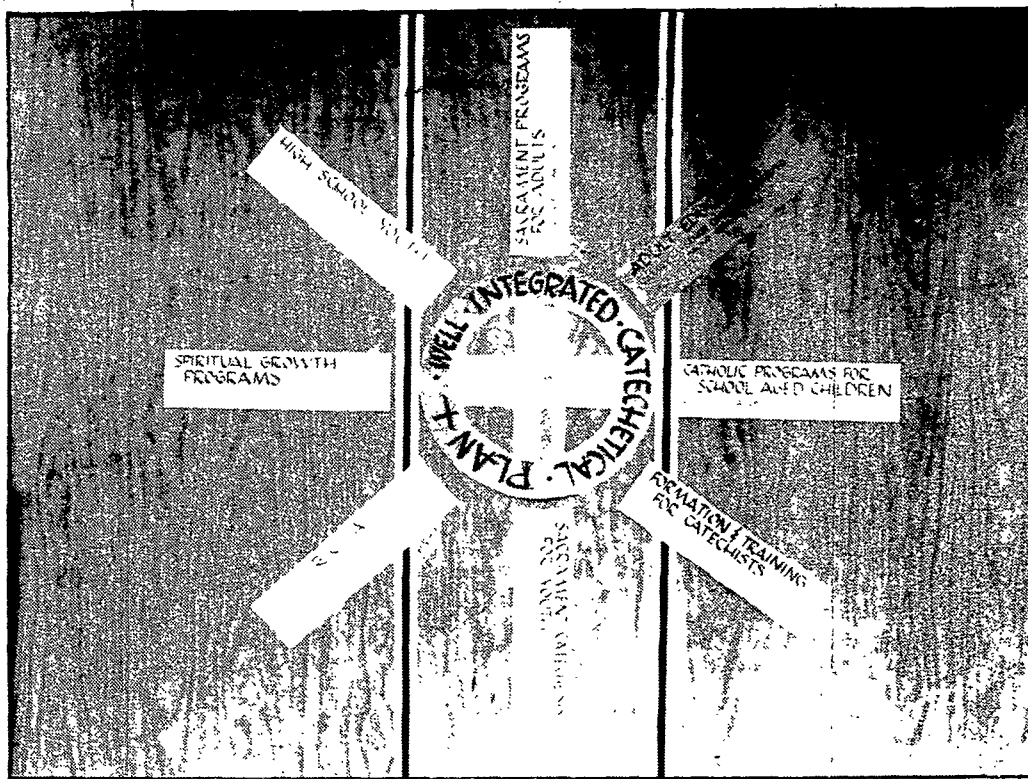
those years how to be an active, vibrant Catholic, Christian community in other ways.

We had a dedicated, if simple, religious-education program, although we called them "catechism classes" in those days. The Sisters of St. Joseph came all the way from Portland to direct the program. Each class met twice a week, once on Sunday mornings between the two Masses and once after school. We only had the church building, so that's where we had class. Each grade had a few pews with two empty pews between grades "for order." There we recited our lessons and held our first religious discussions.

The high school classes, which met one evening a week, were especially exciting. There we could meet our friends, flirt, gossip and begin to learn from each other what it meant to be part of a Catholic minority in a small New England town in the 1950s and '60s.

I have wonderful memories of growing up Catholic in that small parish:

- The Masses when I was a child were solemn and mysterious, spoken in a strange language I assumed was God's native tongue.
- The church building during the week was dark, quiet, and safe.
- The "catechism classes" were taught by teenagers once we were Confirmed. We "taught" at the ripe old age of 13! Imagine!
- The time after Sunday evening rosary and Benediction gave us leisure to "visit" with neighbors before continuing home.
- The strict Friday rules made us remember who we were.



This display, created by Sister Mary Ann Binsack, diocesan director of education, illustrates the education division's desire to integrate all aspects of Catholic education.

- The Communion and Lenten fasts gave us a sense of being special and strong.
- The sense of awe, of God's presence, permeated the church and spilled out into our lives.

Even though our school closed after a few short years, it taught us many valuable lessons. Above all we learned the importance of sharing a common dream. We just couldn't handle being done. We needed a new dream.

Then Vatican II came to Maine. It threw open the windows and sent out new challenges. All of a sudden we realized there was more to being Catholic than we had imagined. Before, we had been in control. We had formulated the dream and we had made it come true. Now God was in control — and God was full of surprises!

Never again would we feel so safe — so insulated from others and from the world. The dream of Vatican II threw us out into the

midst of that very world where we were expected to find our identity in new ways. Now we had to begin to understand anew what it means that God became human in Jesus, and how we are to go about being Jesus' presence in the world today.

I am involved in adult-religious education today because I believe in this mission. Yes, I carry warm, rich memories of how things used to be. But, now I am challenged to be involved in the process of discovering the questions posed by life and of seeking the answers within a community of faith.

The religious-education program at Assumption of Our Lady Church is an ideal one for me. We have a long history of religious education, including a released-time program begun by Father Leonard Kelly in 1954. We provide Catholic education for people of all ages, pre-school through adult. We have classes for children in kindergarten

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CATHOLIC SCHOOL OFFICE
Department of General Education
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August, 1989

Dear Friends,

In a recent *Catholic Update* article entitled "Why We Chose a Catholic School for Our Children," author Mitch Finley concludes that parents send their children to a Catholic school because "Catholic schools blend academic excellence with an out-in-the-open Christian perspective on life and the world. A Catholic school openly recognizes and celebrates the holy in the ordinary."

As we begin the 1989-90 school year, I look forward to working with our parish leaders, parents, principals and faculties toward making the Catholic school a place that nurtures this life-orienting faith and promotes a commitment to service.

In transition from parish-based schools to a Catholic-school system, we will continue the availability of quality Catholic schooling for the people of our diocese, especially for the economically disadvantaged. I realize that it is with hope, but not without loss and apprehension, that we move to this new form of governance.

This system will allow us to enhance the Catholic schools as a significant catechetical ministry. They — along with other educational ministries — support and encourage effective faith formation for people of all ages.

These are critical times. The educational mission of the church requires both our attention and commitment. I pray that each of us may renew our commitment to Catholic education in our diocese, so that we may educate for a living, active and conscious faith that opens us to the Kingdom of God.

Sincerely,

Brian M. Walsh CFC

Brother Brian M. Walsh, CFC
Superintendent of Schools



DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER
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Bishop's Office

August, 1989

My Dear People,

This September is a landmark in the history of Catholic education in our diocese. The parishes in the Northeast Quadrant of Monroe County will support a Catholic-school system within their quadrant, replacing parish-based schools. This system will strengthen our commitment to quality Catholic-school education.

I am very pleased with the collaboration of local groups and the work of the Commission on the Reorganization of Catholic Schools in the development of a Catholic-school system that allows for flexibility and decision making at the level closest to those affected.

I realize that transitions are difficult, and I am most grateful for the support and cooperation shown by parish leadership and parishioners as we move to this system.

During the coming year, the remaining three quadrants in Monroe County will finalize their plans to be submitted to the commission. Also, I have asked the Catholic Schools Office to work closely with the three clusters outside Monroe County to develop a process for the development of a plan compatible with the Monroe County System Plan.

The Catholic school is an important component of our envisioned Well-Integrated Catechetical Plan. As we begin a new academic year, I am mindful, too, of all the other educational ministries, which are so vital to this comprehensive catechetical process: religious-education programs; the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults; youth ministry; sacramental preparation; the continuing formation of ministers; and adult education. We must enhance our commitment to ongoing growth in faith for all our people by developing and supporting these efforts in our parishes.

We face many challenges in the year ahead. Let us continue to pray, support and encourage one another as we strive toward our future.

With every good wish, I remain,

Your brother in Christ,

Matthew H. Clark

Matthew H. Clark
Bishop of Rochester

Insight

Thursday, August 10, 1989