

EDITORS' NOTE: In December, St. Bernard's Institute sponsored an event entitled "An Evening with Three Bishops." During that evening Bishops Matthew H. Clark, Joseph L. Hogan and "Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid" (portrayed by Father Al Delmonte, pastor of St. Salome's Church in Irondequoit) reflected on the church's life and episcopal ministry in Rochester over the past 123 years.

Inspired in part by that program and to commemorate Catholic Schools Week, staff writer Lee Strong researched Bishop McQuaid's writings and speeches on many aspects of Catholic education — specifically Catholic schools — and compiled them in the "interview" that follows.

Bishop earned 'greatest glory' by building up parish schools

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Bishop McQuaid, throughout your career as a priest — and especially during your time as bishop of Rochester (1868-1909) — you were concerned with Catholic education.

"I am marked by some as a crank on the educational question. But it seems to me that the only hope of the American church lies in the education of the young."

Why is that?

"If ever we are to hold our Catholics to the faith in these United States, it must be through the instrumentality of Catholic schools for Catholic children.

You sound firm on that point.

"Unless children are trained, nurtured, schooled under Catholic influences and teachings, they will be lost to God's church."

As I understand it, you were orphaned at an early age and were raised and educated in the Prince Street Orphan Asylum in New York City by the Sisters of Charity. You grew up and were ordained a priest during the days of New York's Archbishop John Hughes (1797-1864). Wasn't he also a strong advocate of Catholic schools?

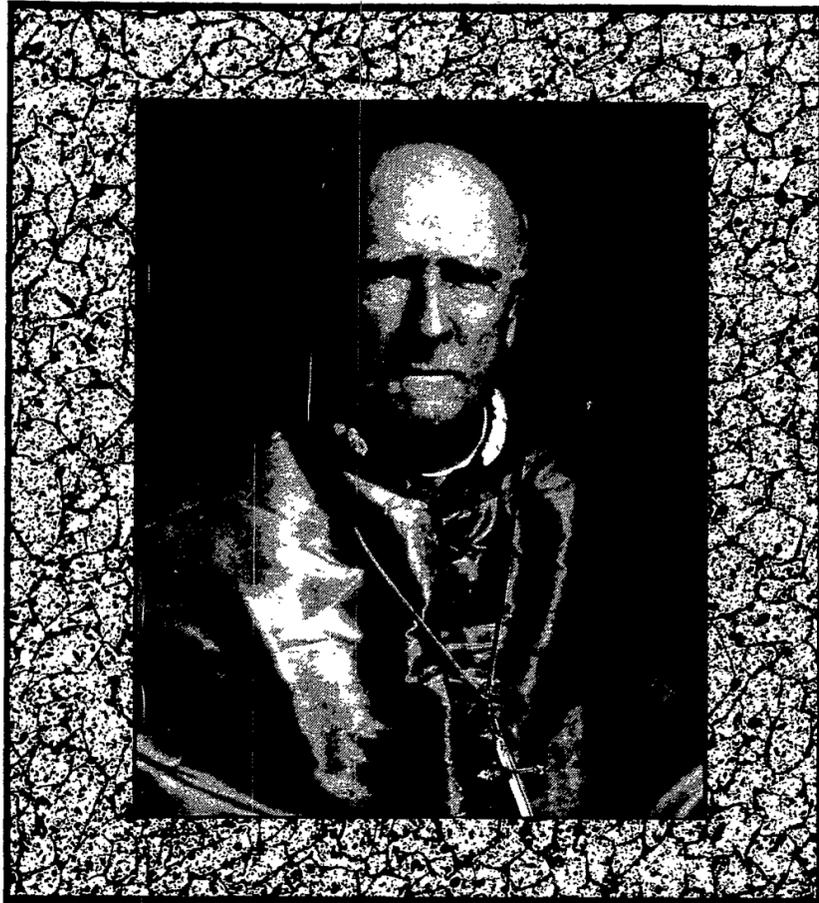
"It is Archbishop John Hughes' bold stand that has made the Catholic school system what it is today."

How did the archbishop's efforts and your own experiences as a child in the orphanage influence your beliefs about Catholic education?

"I used to look at those boys in New York, everywhere crowding our streets, but not crowding our churches, and many a time I had occasion to say to myself, 'If God had not been kinder to me than to these, might I not be much worse?'"

"God in his mercy had given me the opportunity of a Christian education. Could I not then, in common gratitude, try to gain children entrusted to my care, could I not try to teach them to know this same God by a Christian education?"

In 1848, you were assigned to St. Vincent's Church in Madison, N.J. The parish encompassed a number of



towns and villages, and you were constantly on the road to meet the spiritual needs of your parishioners. Yet in 1849, you opened a school in the basement of your church, and even taught the students yourself for six months. With so many other duties, what led you to open the school?

"While journeying through (the) district, hunting up stray sheep of the fold, the experience was acquired that without schools our children, and especially those of mixed marriages, would be lost."

That school was the first Catholic school in New Jersey. In 1850, you also started the state's second Catholic school in Morristown, correct?

"I know you will not blame me

in terms of Catholic education?"

"When a bishop's responsibility came to me, it did not take me long to see that my first duty was to take care of the children of the people ..."

So you pushed for the building of Catholic schools in every diocesan parish, even urging newly forming parishes to start schools while still constructing their church buildings?

"I have ever said that I would rather see the school house without the church than the church without the school house."

That's a rather strong statement.

"For many years, I have felt that, in this country, the Catholic school was as necessary for the children as the church was for them and their parents.

'God in his mercy had given me the opportunity of a Christian education. Could I not then, in common gratitude, try to gain children entrusted to my care, could I not try to teach them to know this same God by a Christian education?'

when I tell you that I feel prouder today — prouder by far, that so many years ago I founded and established, and carried along successfully, the humble parochial schools of Madison and Morristown than I ever felt at having established Seton Hall College and Seminary for the education of the rich or of Levites for the Sanctuary of God."

As you've just noted, you helped establish Seton Hall University and Seminary in 1856, serving as its first president for a year, then returning to that position in 1859 and remaining there until you were named Bishop of Rochester in 1868.

In Rochester, you also created a seminary — St. Bernard's — in 1893. But when you first arrived in the diocese, what was your primary concern

For, although the chief mission of the church is to preach the Gospel of Christ, yet there is little likelihood of the Gospel reaching and abiding in the hearts of the children, except through the instrumentality of the school house.

And that school should be Catholic?

"The only education for a Catholic child is that which is given in a Catholic atmosphere by God-fearing teachers in full harmony with Catholic instincts and practices.

"Our religion comes by hearing, is a matter of faith and not simply of opinion, and is made up of divine sacraments instituted by Jesus Christ with the observance of which, from the child's earliest days of reason and discretion, it needs to be familiar by

precept and use.

"It is not possible to obtain the necessary results of Christian education in any other than Catholic schools. Whatever excuse may save those from sin who, so placed that they cannot possibly send their children to Catholic schools ... nothing can be said to exempt from grievous guilt priests and people who, being able, fail to provide Catholic schools for their children.

"Many of us yet have a serious account to render Him, in whose eyes are always the faces of these little ones, for having cared more for fine churches than for needed schoolhouses."

Of course, many people in your time argued that the public school system was fine for all students.

"If we are not to educate our children in our own faith, churches of more perishable material would be in order, these solid structures in brick and stone, arising on every side, would only stand as monuments of the folly of a race that so dealt in material things that it could not preserve for a few generations a faith handed down to it by persecuted ancestors who had treasured it lovingly and steadfastly in thatched chapels during centuries of hardship and martyrdom. (We must) build school houses then for the religious training of (our) children as the best protest against a system of education from which religion has been excluded by law."

But can't the influence of public schools be offset through Sunday school or religious-education programs after school?

"Sunday schools are very good so far as they go, but they do not go far enough. Every one with his eyes open can see what efforts are needed to bring into the Sunday schools the children even of the classes that have home instruction and require Sunday school least of all; while the children whose homes are wanting in religious training and who do not obtain it in the state schools, are the ones most frequently absent from the Sunday schools.

"A serious and fatal objection to the proposition that the churches shall provide religious instruction for the children of the various denominations after school hours lies in the well-known law of human nature, that what becomes tiresome and annoying is not received with advantage.

"A child that has been restrained all day and kept at its books of secular learning will look with horror at the additional task imposed on its flagging and exhausted energies at the close of a hard day's work. We must not make religion distasteful to our children, even to please our friends of no religion."

In your view, what is needed to sustain a Catholic school system?

"The maintenance of Catholic schools demands of bishops, priests and people great sacrifices, much labor, and a large expenditure of money. I have always believed that the cause of Catholic education was worthy of such sacrifices."

You certainly expended much effort during your time in Rochester to promote Catholic schools.

"In the upbuilding of this diocese many battles have been fought, many victories have been won, but the schools are my greatest glory."