

Why we need Catholic schools

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnists

Catholics have made extraordinary sacrifices over the years to establish and maintain an expensive system of elementary and secondary schools in parishes and dioceses all across the United States.

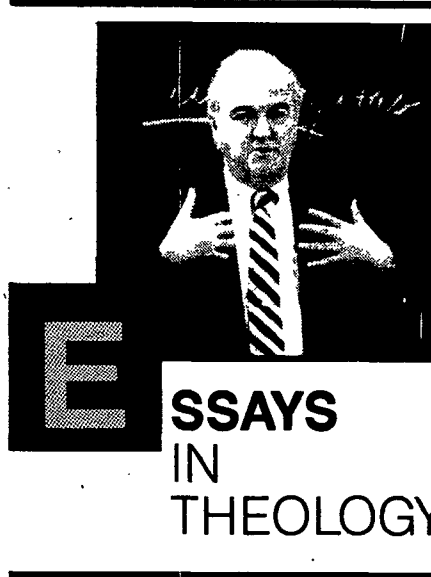
In recent years the costs have proved too much and many of these schools have had to close. Pastors and bishops alike have felt the anguish and sometimes the wrath of disappointed parents after such decisions have been announced.

To be sure, Catholic schools have rarely been free of controversy, even in the best of times. Some complained about the inordinate drainage of personnel and money from other parish and diocesan activities.

Specifically, they argued that more attention should have been paid to religious-education programs. Those were the days when Catholic children who went to public schools tended to be looked down upon ("the publics," they were called), and little real investment was made in their catechetical formation.

In the midst of this controversy, Mary Perkins Ryan, a well-known religious educator, wrote a widely discussed book entitled, *Are Parochial Schools the Answer?*

Another longstanding controversy has centered on the use of federal and state funds for parochial schools, or at least for the children



who attend them. Should there be direct aid, tax credits, vouchers, and the like? Would such assistance be constitutional?

A more recent controversy has erupted over the closing of parochial schools located in our inner cities. With the Catholic population having long since moved to the suburbs, large urban parishes have been left stranded, like beached whales, in neighborhoods now dominated by the non-white, non-Catholic poor.

Some bishops have worked desperately to keep these schools open in order to serve the urban poor, regardless of their religious affiliations. But other bishops have just as strongly felt they could not justify the expenditure of limited resources

on the education of non-Catholics. Meanwhile, many Catholics continue to insist on the irreplaceable role of Catholic schools in the life and mission of the church, and many others suggest an ignoble motive behind at least some of this support. Catholic schools, the latter argue, too often provide an escape from public-school systems with predominantly non-white student enrollments.

Most of us are familiar with all or some of these controversies. Whatever our stand on them, a recent full-page report in the Nov. 20, 1991, issue of *The New York Times* serves as a reminder of the still-enormous potential for good that Catholic schools have, especially in inner cities.

Focussing on Detroit, the article notes that a large number of non-Catholic blacks are choosing East Catholic High over their local public schools, even though the Catholic school is so short of money that it can't afford a school bus, has a tiny cafeteria, and offers far fewer courses and extracurricular activities.

According to the *Times* report, what draws the parents is the school's record of academic success: 75-95 percent of the student body advances to some level of post-secondary education. And East Catholic produces this result with children who have done poorly in public schools.

The poverty of the students' academic record is matched only by the

poverty of their economic condition. Almost three-quarters are poor enough to qualify for the federal free-lunch program. In spite of this, their parents manage to scrape together the \$1,475 in tuition fees.

The *Times* points out that only 14 percent of the parents are Catholic and that virtually every one of the 205 students in East Catholic High is black.

In contrast with the general decline in the enrollment of white students in Catholic schools, the enrollment of black and Hispanic children has been steadily increasing since 1970.

Sister Jeanette Salbert, one of East Catholic's co-principals, attributes her school's success to the teachers' determination to know each student personally, to teach them values, and to work hard to get them into a college-oriented curriculum.

The case for Catholic schools, the *Times* report concludes, has put many public schools "on the defensive." They look for all sorts of excuses why their Catholic counterparts seem consistently to do better.

But the researchers offer them no sympathy. For them the lesson is that every school can be like the best Catholic schools, if only the public school would strive to emulate their most obvious virtues.

"Are parochial schools the answer?" Perhaps not everywhere. But they are in the inner city. And where else should one expect to find the servant church?

The power of words is immeasurable

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-20; (R1) Nehemiah 8:2-4, 5-6, 8-10; (R2) 1 Corinthians 12:12-30.

The word "Watergate" conjures up all kinds of nasty connotations for us. We think of a nation almost torn apart by controversy. We remember laws broken and powerful people trying to cover things up.

In Sunday's first reading we are told that the scribe Ezra stood "before the Water Gate" and read to the people from dawn to midday. Here we see a nation being reborn, the Law upheld and powerful figures revealing the truth.

About 536 B.C. the remnant of the tribe of Judah returned to a destroyed Jerusalem. In 515 B.C. the temple was rebuilt. Nehemiah came along about 445 B.C. — the period of Obadiah and Malachi. The Jewish community was struggling at the time.

Enemies from outside — such as the Samaritans — threatened the community, while poverty, discontent and religious apathy from within weakened it. Nehemiah's return as governor was a turning point for the Jews. He rebuilt the

walls of the city of Jerusalem and started religious reform.

Ezra came along shortly after, about 398 B.C., and brought the Law and the religious authority necessary to restructure the community of faith. Tradition credits Ezra for originating the synagogue service.

The Jewish religion at the time needed to be redefined, which Ezra accomplished. Inspired by God, he established the Law (Torah) as sacred writing. So he proposed it as the rule of life for the Jewish community.

The occasion was the Feast of Tabernacles. Men, women and children — who were old enough to understand — gathered for the Feast. Ezra stood on a platform so all the people could see him. When he opened the book of the Law to read, the people stood up in respect for the inspired word of God. They listened attentively from dawn to midday.

Ezra read in Hebrew, but at that time the people had trouble with the language. In Babylon they had begun to learn Aramaic. So the Levites translated the Hebrew into Aramaic and also interpreted the meaning of the Law. This interpretation became known as a Targum.

The people wept when they heard the Law. They wept as they sensed their ingratitude to a God who had been so faithful to them throughout their history. But tears of repentance brought joy, and joy led to celebration.

God's words are always meant to lead to joy after repentance. Joy in the Lord is meant to give strength to God's people.

And so Jesus, like Ezra, reads God's words in the synagogue of Nazareth. And the church, like Jesus, reads His words in every Mass in the Liturgy of the Word.

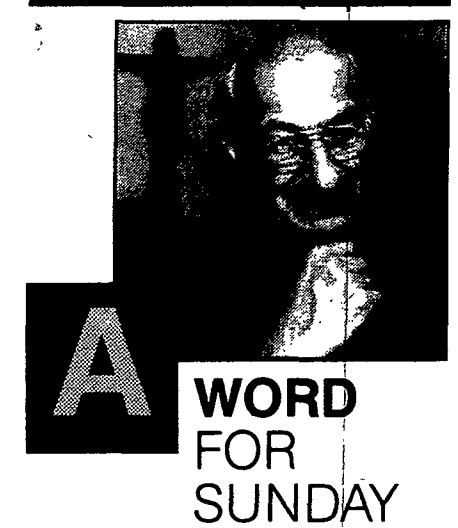
Human words are powerful. Leo Rosten, in his little essay, "The Power of Words," pays them this tribute:

"They sing. They hurt. They teach. They sanctify. They were man's first immeasurable feat of magic. They liberated us from ignorance and our barbarous past ...

"A picture is worth 10,000 words," goes the timeworn Chinese maxim. "But," one writer tartly said, "It takes words to say that" ...

We live by words: Love, Truth, God. We fight for words: Freedom, Country, Fame. We die for words: Liberty, Glory, Honor ...

And the men who truly shape our destiny, the giants who teach us, inspire



us, lead us to deeds of immortality, are those who use words with clarity, grandeur and passion. Socrates, Lincoln, Churchill — Jesus!"

But in the mouth of God, inspired by Him, words reach their superlative power.

Once Jesus took bread and said, "Change" — and it did.

Once Jesus took wine and said, "Change" — and it did.

He gave this same power to His disciples to change people into a joyful and loving people, a people of God by the word, and it does.

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