

Catholic schools play role in mission

By Father Joseph A. Hart
Guest contributor

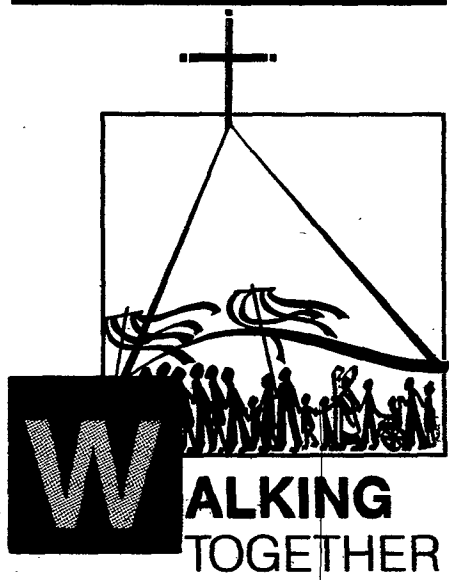
Frankly I was relieved when the recommendation promoting the need for a diocesan Catholic school system made it into the top five in the aggregate vote of the May Regional Synods. Only 14 parishes had submitted recommendations about Catholic Schools from their Lenten Parish Synod discussions and at least some of these suggested that "parishes who do not have access to a Catholic School should not have to fund them" or questioned "whether Catholic Schools are a just use of limited resources."

I was relieved because, looking at the larger picture, Catholic schools are not just a faith development luxury we once could afford, but an important ministry that we must sacrifice to keep because it flows from our very mission as church.

Last May, New York State's Education Department released its report on the Catholic schools in the state. The study revealed that our schools are:

* *academically superior:* "New York State Catholic elementary and secondary schools students have attained, on the aggregate, higher levels of educational achievement than the students attending the State public schools."

* *more welcoming to minorities:* "The rates for minority enrollment in Catholic schools in New York State



(36.6%) ... were significantly above the national rate."

* *more successful in keeping kids in school:* The dropout rate for Catholic schools (1 percent) was significantly less than that for New York's public schools (7.7 percent).

* *more able to motivate kids to achieve:* Catholic high school graduates have a higher rate of college attendance (73 percent) than public school graduates (47 percent).

* *more cost effective:* The average per-pupil cost for public school students in New York State is currently \$7,845 compared to a per-pupil cost of \$2,200 in the Rochester diocese's elementary schools.

* *despite the fact that Catholic school*

students have just as many limiting factors as public school students: "Students with multiple risk factors (poor families, single-parent households, parents never finished high school, siblings dropped out of school) constitute approximately the same proportion of the population in both the Catholic schools and in New York's public schools."

We can never lose sight of the fact that the chief reason why our schools are so successful educationally and sociologically is that they attempt to create a Christian environment in which each person is recognized as a child of God, each student is valued for his or her gifts, each pupil is motivated to work to the best of his or her ability. Because the tenets of Catholic faith are clearly taught, each student understands the reasons for expected classroom conduct and is provided with the motivation to succeed (whether they do so or not). Because a general atmosphere of order prevails, the educational process takes place more successfully than elsewhere despite the fact that the buildings may be older and equipment may not be the latest.

Few would argue with the success of our schools but many would complain about their cost. According to several studies, the rising cost of Catholic education is the chief reason why many families have chosen public education for their children.

Locally, because the costs had risen

and enrollment had declined every year since 1959, Bishop Matthew H. Clark decided in the mid-1980s that something had to be done because soon only wealthy parishes would be able to afford schools. Although painful for many parishes wedded to their schools, he began in 1989 to establish a diocesan school system in an attempt to keep an active Catholic school in each area of the diocese supported by all the regional parishes (even those that had never supported a school before) while trying at the same time to control the tuition costs. His efforts paid off in September 1992 with the first increase in enrollment in 33 years!

The road ahead is not smooth. More marketing needs to be done, and more fundraising and more cost containment as well. In addition, there are justice questions that we have yet to explore: the starting salary for a Catholic school teacher in Rochester is \$14,685, while a starting public school teacher in the Rochester City Schools gets \$28,935. We need to ask whether, in our drive to make Catholic schools affordable, we have ignored our obligation in justice to pay our teachers a living wage.

But the biggest hurdle of all to overcome is our parochialism, our resistance to planning and thinking as a single local church, and consequently our inability to embrace a diocesan Catholic school system as truly our own.

Jesus comes to us in our hour of need

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

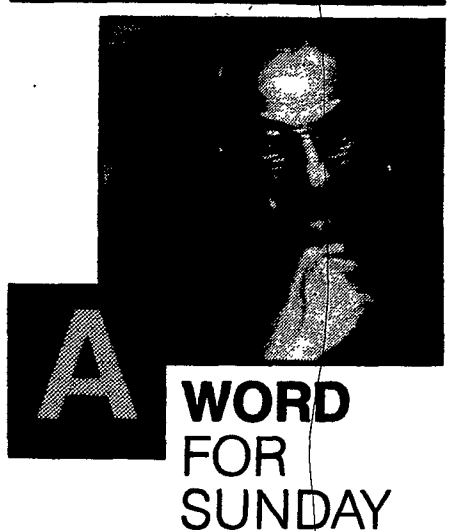
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 14:22-33; (R1) 1 Kings 19:9, 11-13; (R2) Romans 9:1-5.

Worry and fear are the twin plagues of so many people today. Sometimes our fears get the best of us. It happened to the apostles during a terrible storm on the Sea of Galilee. They were fishermen. They had experienced many such storms. They were strong men. But when this storm showed no signs of letting up, fear got the better of them. Then they saw Jesus walking on the sea. They cried in fear, "It is a ghost."

Jesus spoke words of comfort to them. "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

Just prior to this incident, Jesus had been on a mountaintop in prayer. He wanted to be alone. Just a few days before, He had heard of John the Baptist's execution. This shook Jesus. Perhaps He saw in John's death a foreboding of His own end.

He wanted to be alone, but He was interrupted by a vast crowd needing Him. After He had ministered to



them by feeding more than 5,000 with five loaves, He fled again to the mountaintop to be alone. But once again His solitude was broken because His disciples were terrified and fearful — they needed Him.

So Jesus left the solitude of prayer and His own struggle with His final destiny to wade into a stormy sea to save His disciples.

The lesson is clear: Jesus came

unasked to His disciples in the hour of their need. When the wind was contrary and when life was a struggle, Jesus was there to help. Likewise when the storms of life are raging, when all of life seems out of control, when we feel totally helpless, Jesus also comes to us.

He knows, He loves, He cares. Trust Him no matter what! "Why are you so downcast, O my soul?" David cried out. "Hope in God! For I shall again be thanking him, in the presence of my saviour and my God" (Ps. 43:5).

Then the story takes a marvelous and dramatic turn. Peter, upon hearing the Master's voice, not only puts away fear but with his usual impetuosity he asks Jesus to command him to come to Him on the water. Jesus says, "Come." Peter jumps out of the boat into the churning sea. To his great surprise he did not sink. He was walking on the water like Jesus. He took another step. It was a moment of triumph. It was a victory of faith.

Faith involves our venturing out, doing things we had never dreamed of, trusting that God will take care of us. Faith is not just a passive trusting

that God will come to us when the chips are down, but it is an active process — going places we would never go, loving people we would never love, living life to the fullest because we have heard the Master's voice.

Remember how the story ends. Peter steps out on the water and begins his walk. But then the winds kick up. Peter takes his eyes off Jesus. As soon as he does, he begins to sink. Really frightened now, he cries out, "Lord, save me." Jesus does.

Jesus comes to us in our hour of need. He calls us to step out in faith, trusting Him. If we keep our eyes fixed on Him, He will not let us down. The wonderful thing about Peter was that every time he fell he rose again, because in the moment of failure he always cried out to Jesus. A saint is not a person who never falls. A saint is a person who gets up and goes on again every time he falls.

Lastly, when Jesus got in the boat, the storm calmed down. So in every time of storm and stress, Jesus' presence will always bring peace and serenity and calm. Keep Him in your heart.

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