

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 13, 2007 C

WHY MITCH AND KATHY FINLEY CHOSE A CATHOLIC SCHOOL FOR THEIR CHILDREN

My wife and I have three boys, and we send them to a Catholic elementary school. We also plan to have them attend a Catholic high school. Tuition payments don't come easy, of course.

Still, we gladly accept the sacrifices necessary to make tuition payments because we are convinced that Catholic schools make a valuable contribution to the kind of formative experiences we want our children to have.

Catholic schools help the family

We don't believe that Catholic schools are the most important part of a kid's life. That honor goes to the family, which has the most profound impact on a child for good or for ill.

As our neighbor, a man of 72, is fond of saying, "The apples don't fall too far from the tree." Parents have more power than anyone else to shape their children's lives. But parents can use all the help they can get, including help with their children's religious formation. So, we send our children to a school that not only teaches kids to read, write, add and subtract, but at the same time openly supports our faith perspective, our Catholic values and ideals. Society's dominant norms and values offer Christian parents challenges in abundance. Catholic schools give us more support, not more competition.

A Catholic school that lives up to its name supplements and supports Christian family influences. It also helps children learn that religion is not just a private or family matter. A Catholic school says to students, "Our faith is meant to be carried into the everyday world and lived there."

Some parents say that they don't send their children to a Catholic school because to do so is to insulate kids from reality. I respond that it all depends on what one means by reality. The typical Catholic school is very much in contact with the real world. Today, it's virtually impossible to avoid such contact.

We have friends who do not send their children to a Catholic school because, in their words, "a Catholic school cultivates a 'hothouse' atmosphere that protects children from the harsh realities of life. Catholic school isolate kids from how pluralistic our society is

culturally, economically and in terms of values and religions."

On the contrary, I argue that Catholic schools not only respect but celebrate cultural diversity, and they do an outstanding job of serving the poor and racial minorities. In most Catholic schools there is ecumenical representation also, not only among the students but among teachers, as well.

If a Catholic school does distance kids from some of society's more undesirable influences, such as drugs and violence, what parent in his or her right mind would apologize for that?

Catholic school kids live in the same world as other kids. If anything, a Catholic school's powerful dedication to passing along a Christian perspective and an explicitly Christian moral code may give a child extra knowledge, skills and support to deal with the "harsh realities."

In the words of one father: "We send our children to a Catholic school because we want to give them, not only an excellent academic education, but also every opportunity to learn the advantages of a Christian way of life. We do all we can to live our faith as a family, but we know that school is a big part of a child's life, too, and school experiences can have a profound effect. We think our kids will be better people for having attended Catholic schools."

Countering the dominant culture

Parents should always remember that family environment and the dominant social climate have a powerful impact on kids, so Catholic schools can't be expected to work miracles. All the same, Catholic schools strive to provide a clearly countercultural social and learning environment rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Parents should never underestimate the potential for this environment to touch kids "where they live."

It is true that youth sometimes reject the religious vision a Catholic school offers them. Still, the seeds are sown, and years later when life is no longer so simple those seeds may well sprout and bear fruit.

Catholic schools encourage kids to respect other religious and philosophical perspectives, but at the same time they teach the Catholic faith and celebrate the liturgical seasons. Parents who send their children to a Catholic school can feel confident that such a school supports and nourishes the faith tradition that is precious to them.

The first time this touched us in a special way was when our oldest son was in the first grade. We encourage a different member of our family each week to decide what form of table prayer we have before our evening meal, and one day it was this oldest son's turn. He piped up with, "Let's have one minute of shared silent prayer. We do that at school, and I think it's neat."

Three children under the age of six silent for a whole minute? We could hardly believe our ears. But it worked beautifully. This is just one example of how a Catholic school, even in first grade, deepened our son's spiritual development. And to this day, several years later, our children's favorite form of meal prayer is shared silent prayer as we hold hands around the table.

At Christmastime, kids in a Catholic elementary school discuss the birth of Christ in their classrooms and present to their parents a pageant based on the Nativity story in the gospels. At Easter, in a Catholic school the focus is on the Resurrection of Jesus and the meaning of that mystery of life here and now. Such experiences help nourish the spiritual lives of our children.

Nourishing both mind and heart

Studies completed in recent years indicate that Catholic schools succeed admirably at what they are established to do. Summarizing the results of these studies, most of which, so far, have been done at the high school level, sociologist Peter L. Benson reports that Catholic schools have "a caring and nurturing sense of community, legitimated and enhanced by a shared commitment to faith."

Benson, president of Search Institute in Minneapolis and principal investigator on three major studies of Catholic schools, addressed the National Catholic Education Association's annual convention. He reported that Catholic school students tend to have a high degree of pride in their schools. Also Catholic schools tend to emphasize academic achievement through high expectations shared by teachers and students.

Catholic schools promote a high level of compliance with academic and social norms. Class-cutting, fighting and absenteeism are infrequent.

None of this, however, is enough to justify the existence of a Catholic school. If Catholic schools are little more than fine academic institutions, they would do better to close down and funnel their financial resources to other purposes.

The primary reason we send our children to a Catholic school is a religious one, which means, of course, that it is a reason that touches every dimension of life. "It is a commitment to heart and spirit, as well as mind," believes Benson, "that gives Catholic schools a unique and vital mission. The effective Catholic school is one that nurtures a life-orienting faith; it fulfills an academic purpose and simultaneously promotes a disposition to service, sparks a

passion for justice, and creates a commitment to community."

What this means is that a Catholic school touches kids on every level of their existence, and we find this to be true with our own children. Our kids are as likely to ask for help with memorizing a new prayer or for help with a project on the problem of world hunger as they are to ask for help with this week's spelling words.

Fostering a Sense of what is true and just

One of the important services we expect from a Catholic school is that of reinforcing our family's conviction that a Christian life-style sometimes conflicts with what's popular with the rest of society. We want our children to learn that it's O.K. *not* to go along to get along. We want them to respect other people's rights, but to keep a firm grasp on their own sense of what's true and just. We want them to be willing to stick their necks out for others if the occasion calls for it. And we want them to learn not to take the dictates of the fashion and entertainment industries too seriously. We find support for such attitudes in Catholic schools.

The Catholic school our children attend encourages the same nonviolent ways to resolve conflict that we encourage at home. We talk at home—at appropriate times and on a level children can grasp—about racism, poverty and sexism. The same happens at school. We feel good about the fact that what we get from our Catholic school is active support for our attempts to live values that sometimes differ from those of the surrounding society.

Commitment of Staff and parents

Youngsters are why Catholic schools exist, but dedicated teachers make them tick. They constitute the heart of Catholic schools. And the studies overwhelmingly show, writes Benson, that teachers in Catholic schools "are a special group of people." Catholic school teachers have strong educational and religious commitments, a concern for educating the whole person—intellectually, spiritually and physically—and an enthusiastic devotion to the mission of the Catholic school. They are willing to do whatever is necessary to make a Catholic school work.

We sense a genuine interest in our children on the part of their teachers. They care very much about our children as individuals. Indeed, most Catholic school teachers are there for deeply felt personal reasons. In order to contribute to the educational ministry of the church, many accept a salary lower than that of their counterparts in other schools while, at the same time, they support efforts to create financial systems that will give them a more just wage. For most Catholic school teachers, teaching is a public statement of a personal faith commitment.

One of the big reasons many Catholic schools have an outstanding track record is that they require a high degree of parental involvement. Most expect parents to help with a variety of school activities.

Offsetting the familiar cynicism

Some parents do not send their children to a Catholic school because they themselves feel that they got a raw deal from a Catholic school as children, and perhaps they did. In all likelihood, however, that situation no longer exists. The schools of years ago were appropriate to the Church and the world at that time. Today's largely lay-staff Catholic schools are generally up-to-date, academically excellent and exciting places. A parent with an open mind may well discover in Catholic schools the most complete formal learning environment around for children. Why should *my children miss* the fullest schooling possible because of *my* past unpleasant experience?

I saw a bumper sticker that said, "I Survived Catholic Schools." The source of this cynical jocularly is, of course, the now nearly mythical Catholic schools of the 1940's and 50's, schools supposedly heavy with guilt and knuckle-rapping nuns.

My wife and I attended Catholic elementary schools in the 1950's, graduated from Catholic high schools in the mid-1960's and completed studies at Catholic universities and graduate schools. Our experiences were different from those reflected by the cynical bumper sticker. We can tell our share of Catholic school stories, but more powerful than any sense of limitation in the Catholic schools of yesterday is our conviction that there was something special about those years.

When we try to pin down reasons for our lasting positive feelings about Catholic schools, we think of the sense of belonging we found there. It's called "community" today—the feeling that we were cared for, and the constant, gently, out-in-the-open determination to share with us, the students, a quiet and dependable mystery at the center of which was the love of God.

Open affirmation of God's existence

This same loving God is a powerful presence in the Catholic school our children attend. God is there, thick in the air, quiet and warm in the classrooms and vibrant when the playground rings with the laughter and shouts of children.

A Catholic school exists to lead its students beyond a purely secular, relativistic outlook on learning and life. A Catholic school is not staffed by saints, halos aglow, but, all the same, a Catholic school, in the midst of solid academic effort, is dedicated to calling forth the loving God day by day. Efforts to do this make a difference in the life of a child or youth that he or she can feel.

A Catholic elementary school has the freedom to open its windows to the Spirit, who blows and plays where she will. A Catholic high school can openly encourage the adolescent search for self to happen in tandem with the search for God, as it should. And in Catholic schools prayer and Scripture—no small matter—are normal parts of everyday life.

Why do we send our 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 doesn't function as if God were simply a matter of personal opinion. A Catholic school openly recognizes and celebrates the holy in the ordinary.

This is the kind of schooling we want for our children.
[End of Finley article]

Financial Support for our Catholic school

Financing Catholic education is one of the many challenges facing parishes as they continue to provide a solid Catholic education for their children. The four big helps in this area are:

- **Grandparents:** Some of the tuition fees in every Catholic school are paid by grandparents. Thank you grandparents. Also, we sometimes have individuals who feel very strongly about the value of Catholic Schools and will offer the school a scholarship for a needy family
- **Parish Support:** Our U.S. bishops tell us that the parish school is a ministry of the whole parish. It always has been in the United States and hopefully it will continue to be. This past year our parish gave about \$100,000 in tuition aid to families. Pastors, at least this one, sees such support as a wise investment in the future of children and in the future of our church.
- **Bingo:** Next year we intend to give the gross income of the Thursday bingo to the school. We estimate that it will be \$150,000. A big thank you to Hank Laneville, coordinator of our bingo who has been doing a super job with bingo since he took it over a couple of years ago. I also thank his many helpers.
- **School Endowment:** This year due to a generous gift in a Will we reached the \$1 million mark. We will now begin to draw from the endowment. My goal is to grow the endowment to \$5 million. In a recent revision of my own Will, I have left a gift to our School Endowment. I encourage you to consider doing the same. Long after we are gone our gift will be helping our parish to educate and form the leaders of tomorrow.
- **Thrift Store:** This current year our Thrift Store will give about \$40,000 in Tuition aid. Tuition payments make up only 65% of our \$2½ million budget for this year.

Have a blessed week,

Le Paron