

St. Catherine of Siena Martinez, Parish Newsletter - April 2010

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Catholic Education: When, Why and How!

By ANDREW von HAUNALTER, Principal, St. Catherine of Siena School

I'd like to begin this edition of the Parish Newsletter by saying a sincere "Thank You" to those of you who have supported St. Catherine's Catholic School this year and in past years.

When the call (i.e. the green collection envelope) goes out each month to donate to "education," all monies collected go directly to assisting needy families with tuition assistance. Your help is both appreciated and necessary to keep our school running.

As much as we'd like to offer Catholic education for little or no cost, the reality is that running a school is becoming more and more expensive.

Of course, it wasn't always this way. In the days of yesteryear, most Catholic schools were staffed by religious orders of "teaching sisters," such as *the founders of St. Catherine of Siena School, the Sisters of St. Joseph.*

These women were serving an important ministry: To establish and run Catholic schools across the nation. In the mid 20th century, the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops determined that *every Catholic family in the United States should send their children to a Catholic school*, as opposed to a "government run" school. To meet this demand Parishes were compelled to build and open a school on Parish grounds.

Each neighborhood parish would then have both a church and a school to serve the local neighborhood families. Attendance at U.S. Catholic schools peaked at 5.7 million students in the early 1960's. Many of you reading this attended a Catholic school run by the "teaching sisters." We are much indebted to them for building the wonderful foundation of Catholic schools!

This school year, we are especially grateful, as 2009 marked the celebration of 60 years of Catholic education in Martinez! In September of 1949, five devoted Sisters of St. Joseph opened St. Catherine of Siena School. There were 250 students in grades 1 through 8, meaning a 1:50 teacher to student ratio!

What motivated the Sisters to establish a Catholic school in Martinez, or anywhere in America for that reason? To find the answer, we must open our history books and take a closer look.

The history of American Catholic parochial education is a dramatic story of a social institution that ingeniously adapted itself to almost constant change in American society without abandoning its **two basic goals:**

- 1. The preservation of the religious faith of Catholic children and**
- 2. The preparation of these children for productive roles in American society.**

Today, America is no longer an “immigrant society” (comparatively speaking) and the Catholic Church is no longer an immigrant church. The ‘siege’ mentality has been lifted. *What need, then, is there to support a separate system of Catholic education in America? What is the rationale for Catholic education today and on into the future?*

In other words, why should we care about the existence of St. Catherine School, or any other Catholic school for that matter?

To answer this question, we can cite the well-known publication, **“To Teach as Jesus Did”** which reads in part:

“Proclaiming the Gospel is a perennial task and joy for the Church of Jesus Christ...Catholic education is an expression of the mission entrusted by Jesus to the Church He founded” (p. 3).

That said, we can now understand the importance of Catholic education to our Church’s mission. But what further purpose does Catholic education serve?

We’ll let the U.S. Catholic Bishops answer this one:

***THE FOURFOLD PURPOSE OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION:**

1. To provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed
2. Community in Christ is experienced
3. Service to our sisters and brothers is the norm
4. Thanksgiving and worship of our God is cultivated

**In Support of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, U.S. Catholic Bishops. 1990*

In a book entitled, “Catholic Schools: Ready for the New Millennium,” Robert Kealy, former Executive Director of the Department of Elementary Schools of the National Catholic Educational Association, proclaims:

“Outside sacramental programs, Catholic schools have done more for evangelization than any other American Church institution. For more than 200 years, they have been the most effective means of helping youth grow in their faith. Catholic schools have been a great gift to the nation. They have educated millions and millions of students who became productive citizens, intensely loyal to their country. As we enter the 21st century, we hope that historians will record that Catholic schools continued to have a profound impact on the Catholic Church and the American nation.”

This year, more than 2.5 million students who attend Catholic schools will graduate -- that's 99 percent -- and almost all will go to college. Even though the per-pupil expenditure per classroom is low, the results are extremely high.

It’s no wonder then, that numerous studies show that parents place their children in Catholic schools for three reasons: the superior academic achievement of Catholic school students; for their secure and disciplined learning environments and for a total education, which includes growth in religious awareness and an appreciation of morals and values.

I am fortunate to be able to bear witness to the wonders of Catholic education at St. Catherine’s each and every day. Each school day starts and ends with prayer, as it should. A loving, faith-filled environment is critical to a student’s development as both a scholar and “whole” person. Without instilling our young people with faith and love, our society cannot progress.

As St. Paul puts it, *“Without love...we are nothing but a clanging symbol or a noisy gong. The love that God gives to us and we, in turn, give to others is that power that transforms our culture from darkness to light, from sadness to joy, from despair to hope. It is through that hope that God gives to us that we can promise a faith-filled future for the next generation.”*

As the old saying goes, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

So, while I’ve written over a thousand words here, I think you’ll find these photos of our students more enriching than any word or words can communicate.

These pictures tell a story—the story of St. Catherine of Siena School.

May our legacy continue on for years to come, so that we may provide our families with the wonderful product of Catholic education they so deserve and are entitled to receive.

The life of our namesake, St. Catherine of Siena:

- Born in 1347, the twenty-fourth child of a reasonably prosperous merchant family.
- She did not attend school (girls were not taught to read in the 14th century). Wanted to read in order to learn more about God. Tried to teach herself to read, but became frustrated; pleaded with God to help her and soon began to read fluently (though she still could not write).
- At the age of six, and again a year later, she had visions of Jesus and committed herself solely to him forever after. For the next six years, she lived a life of voluntary fasting, solitude, prayer,

deprivation, and flagellation, leaving home only to attend mass.

- Her family picked a suitable husband for her at the age of 12 (marriageable), but she told them of her spiritual commitment and shaved her head as a sign of her determination.
- Her family reluctantly admitted her to a group of lay women, who wore the black and white Dominican habit. She retreated to her room for the next 3 years and lived a life of solitary contemplation.
- In her early 20’s, she realized that love of God cannot be separated from service of humanity and she left her room for the streets and sick beds of the city.
- She assumed a prison ministry that made her a welcome and familiar presence at cells and execution sites. She became known as “mama” to a host of followers
- She exercised the innate skill of mediation, first in local disputes, then regionally, and finally at the papal courts of Rome and Avignon. She dictated hundreds of letters to church and political leaders.
- Once told Pope Gregory to be a “manly man” and return the papacy to Rome.
- She composed her extraordinary work, *The Dialogue*, a summary of her theology, her spirituality, her pastoral concerns, and her convictions. She became the first woman to be published in one of the Italian dialects. Only one of two women to be declared a doctor of the church (in 1970).
- Died at the age of 33.



Second graders celebrate First Communion.



Kindergarten snack time.



Seventh grader Taylor Blair explains her science project.



Kindergarten students celebrate Thanksgiving with their families.



These lucky eighth graders have been together since kindergarten.



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