

The Diocese of Great Falls

P.O. Box 1399

Great Falls, Montana

59403

REFLECTIONS ON CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Most Rev. Thomas J. Murphy

Bishop of Great Falls

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Sts. Peter and Paul Parish

Introduction

Once again, it is good to have the opportunity to speak with the Great Falls community about an issue which is important not only to the Catholic community of Great Falls as well as the community at large, but it is an issue which is of vital importance to me as Bishop and as a person who has benefitted from Catholic education throughout my life.

I would like to share with you some reflections on Catholic education from several perspectives. These perspectives neither exhaust or include all that might be said regarding Catholic education but they are the result of my own reflection upon this critical issue.

These perspectives would include:

1. The place of Catholic education in our heritage as Americans
2. The unique advantage of Catholic education
3. The contribution of Catholic education to a civic community
4. The challenges of Catholic education today
5. The need for total Catholic community support
6. Some personal reflections

With such an agenda, I should move on from an introduction to the reflections themselves.

I. THE PLACE OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN OUR HERITAGE AS AMERICANS

Catholic education in our country has its roots in the desire of an immigrant people to preserve values that were important to them. Catholic schools responded to a felt need of an adult generation to share not only the benefits of American freedom and the opportunity for a livelihood with their children, but also to share the all-important heritage of a faith tradition. In many ways our forefathers recognized the power and influence of elementary and secondary education on young people because they would sacrifice to an extreme to have their children benefit from the religious climate and environment which a Catholic school would offer. The freedom of our country would allow people with a specific religious tradition to preserve their religious tradition by the establishment of Catholic schools which offered people a viable option in fulfilling the responsibilities of parenthood. Across the land, there is ample evidence of the Church's commitment to Catholic education. The question today is whether we want to preserve and increase that commitment.

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II. THE UNIQUE ADVANTAGE OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Opportunity for education is one of the great gifts which our own government shares with us. It is part of the American heritage to recognize the importance of education for its young people in order to provide for a future society that will be informed, educated and prepared to be leaders in that society in the future. However, essential to Catholic belief is the realization that human life is a limited gift, restricted to 20 or 40 or 60 or 80 years. Catholic belief points to the reason for human life which is to enjoy eternal life with God. Education should help foster this attitude whereby the principles of the Gospel and the Christian Catholic tradition would be shared with young people through Catholic schools. Catholic education offers the unique advantage of recognizing human life from a Christian perspective - the preparation to live and act and work as an educated person in society today, but also to live as an educated person who knows his or her destiny to be directed towards eternity.

Catholic education has the obligation to offer all the advantages which are essential to the education of young people in our society today, but Catholic education is asked to do more. Catholic education offers a community the advantage of being a counter-cultural force to off-set the values of a secular world and to inculcate and enforce an approach to life from a Christian perspective. Catholic education will be as successful as it remains Catholic in the best sense of the word. When a Catholic school no longer is able to be distinguished from other educational entities in the attitudes and behavior of its faculty and students, then the unique advantage of Catholic education is no longer present. And that is tragic.

III. THE CONTRIBUTION OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION TO A CIVIC COMMUNITY

Catholic education does not take place in a vacuum. It exists alongside the public education opportunities which are available to young people across our land. But in the very existence of Catholic education there is a tremendous contribution made to the civic community. There is the contribution of lower taxes by the very fact that Catholic families not only pay taxes to support a public school system, but they also pay tuition and fees to maintain a Catholic private school system. That is a very tangible contribution of Catholic education to the civic community.

A far less tangible but hopefully real contribution of Catholic education is the sharing with young people of Gospel values which hopefully will make our communities better places in which to live. Gospel values are essential for a civic community - values of justice, charity, honesty, hope, faith and the countless list of virtues that are part of the Christian Catholic tradition.

... Catholic education should never be viewed in opposition or competition

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with public education, but rather seen as complementing it.

IV. THE CHALLENGES OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION TODAY.

The challenges to Catholic education today are many. The very presence of people here this evening is evidence for the awareness of these challenges. Challenges might well be talked about in theory, but they must also be discussed in the concrete reality of a community such as Great Falls, Montana.

The Catholic community of Great Falls has had a rich historical tradition of commitment to Catholic education. The historical presence of Catholic grade school, high school, and college education here in our community is a great gift for the Catholics of the community, as well as for the total community itself. My own predecessors as Bishops here in the Diocese have made Catholic education a priority as is evident from the presence of so many Catholic schools in the community. Likewise, the community has a great proportion of people present who benefitted from Catholic education in Great Falls.

But much has changed since the time when Catholic schools were first built in our community. Some of the changes would include:

1. The decline in the number of religious men and women to staff Catholic schools.
2. The ever-increasing demands from the city and state for education today.
3. The inclusion of many new programs in education itself at every level.
4. The cost factors involved in education
5. The all-pervading presence of inflation
6. A shift in values of families regarding the importance of Catholic education.
7. The hurt that is part of our experience here in Great Falls of the closing of Great Falls Central.

In the face of all this, the question is raised what are the challenges of Catholic education today in our community. They would include among others:

1. The challenge to be CATHOLIC, in the best sense of the word, to dare to be counter-cultural, to offer an education which prepares young people not only to live in the world, but to change it.
2. The challenge of providing our schools with dedicated and competent teachers - religious and lay - who would receive a salary and compensation that reflects the Church's teaching on a just wage.

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3. A willingness to break down the gigantic walls of provincialism between neighborhoods and parishes within our community to amalgamate our schools in some instances if we believe we can achieve the purpose of Catholic education in a better way.
4. The challenge to broaden the base of our student population - to encourage parents to send their children to Catholic schools.
5. The challenge to take pride in our Catholic educational system as a real alternative in society today.
6. The challenge to respond financially to a greater degree for the cost involved in Catholic education on the part of parents and to realize that it is an investment which will have a return not only in time, but also in eternity.
7. The challenge to encourage young people to consider a vocation to priesthood and religious life so that children of succeeding generations will have the advantage of their presence in a parish and a classroom along with the dedicated lay teachers who together share their gifts with students and each other.
8. The challenge to aspire for excellence in all dimensions of Catholic education.
9. The challenge to parents that Catholic education succeeds best when students see the values they are taught lived out in their own families.
10. And the final challenge I propose is the challenge of not only maintaining Catholic education, but constantly looking for ways in which we might expand.

V. THE NEED FOR TOTAL CATHOLIC COMMUNITY SUPPORT

This month's issue of U.S. CATHOLIC has an interesting article entitled, "DOES A CATHOLIC SCHOOL MAKE OR BREAK A PARISH?" The sub-title is: "The trouble with Catholic schools is that you can't live with them and you can't live without them." So much of the article probes the financial demands of Catholic education, but beneath the surface of the article is the reality that if Catholic education is to succeed, then Catholic education is not only the responsibility of parents and families whose children attend Catholic schools, but also the responsibility of an entire parish community.

By its very nature Catholic education should not only benefit those attending Catholic schools; it benefits the entire parish and the entire community. In response, the entire community must sense its responsibility for the support and sustenance of Catholic education.

At the same time, Catholic education has some demands placed upon it. Catholic education must always be a unitive force in a parish and diocese. We should never allow it to become divisive. Catholic education

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in a Catholic school must not be the total concern of a parish with an exclusive youth orientation. A parish and a Catholic community must recognize its responsibility to adults as well as to young people in public schools. It is only when a parish recognizes its total mission of education that Catholic education really succeeds.

We are fortunate in Great Falls for the seven parish communities to receive each year a substantial amount of interest from the sale of Great Falls Central to subsidize and help the religious education programs of teenagers in our parishes. I must be honest with you and state that I regret very much that we do not have a Catholic high school in our community. Whether a Catholic High School should be established again must be the decision of not only a Bishop and priests, but the decision and desire of a community.

Catholic education will not survive unless it has the support of a total community; and the total community owes it support because of the benefits which it receives now and in the future from Catholic education.

VI. SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

And finally some personal reflections. I believe in Catholic education. I am a product of 23 years of it and have been involved for the last 21 years of my life as a priest and Bishop with Catholic education.

I believe I benefited from the gifts which Catholic education offered to me - especially the gifts of sacrifice of my parents who provided the means whereby I would be able to have this advantage. And I do believe Catholic education is an advantage!

Memories of Catholic education will remain with me until the day I die. And they are precious memories, ones that are shared and brought back to memory when one runs into others who shared the same advantage. With such a gift, it is only natural that you hope others might also share it. And that is a very strong personal reason for my belief in Catholic education. Perhaps it is best summed up in a prayer-poem by Rev. John Shea in his book, THE GOD WHO FELL FROM HEAVEN. In a prayer - poem entitled, A PRAYER OF INHERITANCE, he writes: