

Reflections

by the
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Catholic Education – A Gift we must Preserve

Next week our Diocese of Eastern Montana celebrates Catholic Schools Week, an annual event recognizing the important role of Catholic elementary and secondary school. This year's celebration also recalls the 100th anniversary of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore where the Catholic Bishops of the United States issued a pastoral letter asking the clergy and laity of the country to establish parochial schools.

In that pastoral letter of 1884, the Council Fathers saw the need to prepare our young people for the challenges posed by living in an era of rapid technological change and almost unlimited potential. The Council Fathers were interested in promoting the participation of the entire Catholic community in the life of the Catholic school system but they were also interested in assuring that the Catholic school would increase its efforts at enriching the total life of the Church through its programs and achievements.

The Council Fathers in 1884 had a clear understanding of the important influence of the school in the shaping of a child and the production of an adult, and even went so far as to state that at times the school even possesses more influence than either the home or the Church. They concluded that the "school ... ought to be preeminently under the holy influence of religion."

The Council Fathers seemed to predict our own era's renewed interest in religiously oriented schools when they wrote: "The cry for Christian education is going up from all religious bodies throughout the land. And this is no narrowness and 'sectarianism' on their part: it is an honest and logical endeavor to preserve Christian truth and morality among people by fostering religion in the young."

The theme of the 1984 celebration of Catholic Schools Week is: "CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: BEACONS OF HOPE." This image sums up well what Catholic education is all about - it is supposed to make a difference in the faith journey of all involved.

One need not be in Montana long before realizing what a difference one light makes in the darkness of night on a lonely road. That one beacon conveys security and hope on the journey. Catholic education must do the same.

Catholic education exists today in Eastern Montana as a result of the sacrifice and generosity of those who have gone before us. Catholic education continues today because of the dedication, commitment, sacrifice and generosity of teachers, parents, staff and parish communities of our diocese.

A Catholic school should be a focal point in the educational mission of a parish. As such, a Catholic school should never be a divisive element as a parish also fulfills its responsibility of serving all its members in the most effective way possible through the use of its resources.

Catholic education thrives in our country today when it makes a difference - when through the efforts of all involved, the values of our Catholic faith tradition are taught, lived and exemplified in the lives of teachers, administrators and parents. Catholic education makes a difference when religious formation and education follows a defined curriculum which is not only experienced in the daily teaching of religion, but is also experienced in the priority which it has over all other concerns.

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Catholic education must provide the best possible education in the secular subjects, but Catholic education will survive and flourish when it offers “something more” whereby it becomes a beacon of hope to an entire community. When Catholic education does this, it becomes easier to meet the challenges of financial demands and future growth. Catholic education must see its role in the total mission of a parish community where liturgy is a priority and where the total lifestyle of those involved in Catholic education becomes a beacon of hope to the entire community.

Thank you to parents, teachers, school personnel and parish communities who make Catholic education a reality in Eastern Montana today. Catholic education is a gift we have inherited from those who have gone before us. It is a gift must preserve.

Please remember the priests of the Diocese this week as they gather for the Presbyterate meeting in Billings.