

A Blue Ribbon Question: “Catholic Identity”

In the nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor for a seat on the Supreme Court, much has been made of the fact that if approved, her presence on the Court will bring the number of Catholic justices to six – two-thirds of the total.

In a New York Times article, religion reporter Laurie Goodstein notes that four of the six Supreme Court Justices (Scalia, Thomas, Alito and the Chief Justice, Roberts) “are reported to be committed attenders of Mass.” Judge Sotomayor, the Times reports, is labeled a “cultural Catholic, raised in the faith but not often attending Mass.”

In many of the news reports since her nomination, it is often noted that Judge Sotomayor attended 12 years of Catholic school. I am very familiar with her alma mater, Cardinal Spellman High School in my native Bronx, a school that, since the mid-1960s, has been an academically-demanding institution offering an excellent education to a mainly blue-collar student body. The attention given her Catholic education does beg the question whether Judge Sotomayor’s career path would be different today were it not for that experience, which obviously prepared her for her Harvard acceptance.

I knew Spellman High to be solidly Catholic in spirit and in consistent fidelity to the Church and its teachings. Is that to imply that because the Judge is not a regular “Mass attendee,” as are the other four mentioned, her high school somehow failed in its mission? I would not say that at all.

The question, however, does bring to light the importance of our own parochial schools’ “Catholic identity,” a key factor being addressed by our Blue Ribbon Committee as part of their evaluation of the effectiveness of our Archdiocesan Catholic schools. “Catholic identity,” by the way, was cited in a recent survey by our pastors, school principals, presidents and parents as the foremost value to be respected and preserved in our Catholic schools.

In his address to Catholic educators in Washington, D.C., in April of 2008, Pope Benedict set some benchmarks for every level of Catholic educational institutions.

“A university or school’s Catholic identity is not simply a question of the number of Catholic students. It is a question of conviction. ... ”

And then the benchmarks:

- “Do we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear?”
- “Are we ready to commit our entire self-intellect and will, mind and heart -to God?”
- “Is the faith tangible in our universities and schools?”
- “Is it given fervent expression liturgically, sacramentally, through prayer, acts of charity, a concern for justice and respect for God’s creation?”

Extremely helpful standards, if not metrically measurable, for they serve as challenging reference points for school administrators in their ongoing efforts to establish and maintain our schools as verifiably Catholic. In all likelihood, Spellman High and most of our own Archdiocesan schools – even those with largely non-Catholic student bodies – would pass the “Benedict criteria.” But it does take ongoing, demanding effort.

And while we can attempt to measure a school’s Catholicity with some success, we cannot and should not seek to judge that school’s Catholicity solely or even primarily on the basis of a graduate’s Mass attendance, desirable as that practice is. Many other factors must also be considered, such as familial and cultural experiences and attitudes, societal and peer influences, other schooling, negative Church experiences and let’s never forget – divine grace. In the end only the Lord can judge how well any one of us has lived up to the Faith given us.

Along with Cardinal Spellman High, I am pleased and grateful that Judge Sotomayor is “one of us.” And we all hope and pray that if appointed, her decisions will reflect a true “concern for justice and respect for God’s creation.”

Archbishop O'Brien's column will appear intermittently through the summer weeks.