

Blue Ribbon Catholic Education

The Baltimore Sun delivered the good news last week that six Maryland elementary schools were granted the prestigious “Blue Ribbon” award, issued by the United States Department of Education each year to approximately 300 schools nationwide and widely considered the highest honor that an American school can achieve.

Actually there were eight Maryland schools rejoicing as recipients that day. One had to read, for example, the Washington Post to discover that the two omitted by our Baltimore Sun were both Catholic schools, Little Flower in the Archdiocese of Washington, and our own St. John’s in Severna Park. We contacted The Sun to learn why only six of the eight honored schools were mentioned and were told that they were unaware that parochial schools were eligible to participate in the Blue Ribbon Schools Program – now in its 26th year. (After our call, The Sun did eventually highlight St. John’s in its Anne Arundel County edition some four days later).

It might be an overreaction to suggest that our parochial schools are merely tolerated, if not seen by the establishment as something “foreign” to the American experience. It was the First Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1852 that urged the establishment of parochial schools since “public schools” of the time were imbued with an American Protestant culture.

Two hundred years ago this month, Elizabeth Ann Seton laid the foundation for the Catholic school system in our country with the opening of her St. Joseph’s Academy on Baltimore’s Paca Street. The growth of the parochial school system in our country since then is unique in the world and largely responsible for the singular strength of the Church in the United States.

While this is not a time for panic, it must be said, however, that the future of Catholic education is at a crossroads today as never before. In last week’s column, I noted the downward enrollment trends in our Archdiocese and throughout the country. Economic pressures, smaller families and urban population shifts are partly accountable and must call all of us to new resolve to keeping Catholic education available for all our Catholic people and to the non-Catholic poor in the primary and secondary levels.

We must continue and intensify the remarkable endeavors that have kept our school doors open the last dozen and more years.

- Cardinal Keeler's initiative begun in 1996, Partners in Excellence (PIE), has raised an annual average of \$2 million for our inner city schools. The Cardinal continues to approach foundations, corporations and individuals who are well aware of the contribution our schools continue to make in giving hope and productive employment to disadvantaged students, mostly non-Catholics. In all, the Archdiocese will distribute more than \$3.3 million to students throughout the Archdiocese in the form of tuition assistance in the current school year.

- Religious communities, treasures unique to our Archdiocese, continue to celebrate their charisms in a wide and rich variety of educational endeavors in the private Catholic high schools and colleges that continue to give so much to the vitality of the Church here. Their commitment to Catholic education shines especially within the city, where pastors and principals representing many religious communities rally support to maintain parish schools.

- These orders' success in Catholic education and the missionary quality of their reach can be seen from the impressive St. Frances Academy in East Baltimore to the bold partnership between Loyola College and St. Mary of the Assumption School in Govans, as well as Cristo Rey Jesuit High School and Mother Seton Academy in Baltimore - to name just a few.

- Taxpaying families across the country are receiving various constitutional forms of state aid of which Maryland Catholics are being deprived: tax credit for teachers (in Maryland the proposed BOAST tax credit), school busing, substantial school book allowance, corporation encouragement, via tax credits, for scholarship programs. With the help of the Maryland Catholic Conference and the involvement of parents and other supporters of Catholic schools, I think we can stir up some critical grassroots support for greater justice on behalf of all Maryland students. (In Pennsylvania, that state's version of the BOAST tax credit has led more than 2,300 businesses to donate more than \$260 million to educational programs since 2001.)

- The recently formed Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium, six area dioceses have combined their buying power to substantially reduce costs.

Thanks to the findings of The Johns Hopkins University's Carey School of Business, and with the prospect of a thorough review of our whole Archdiocesan-run school program, I would hope one year from now to have a plan better to coordinate our school system's efforts. This must involve grassroots participation on the vicariate and regional levels.

All this, ever keeping in mind Pope Benedict's criterion for Catholic education, offered during his visit to us this spring: "Every Catholic institute is a place to encounter the living God, who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth."

That's our continuing effort: Blue Ribbon Catholic Education.

To our pastors, school administrators and teachers and to our parents, thank you for your often heroic sacrifices. I pray that we can further help to relieve the burden.