

Catholic Schools Week Part 2: What's missing in Catholic education today? The good Sisters!!

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It's Catholic Schools Week:

Yesterday in Part 1, I shared the reflections of Catholic school students—past and present—on the impact and influences that their school experiences had on their lives and those in their families.

As I shared yesterday, our Catholic schools have had a tremendous impact on the lives of students for generations. There is a culture to having gone to a Catholic school.

Who else would understand about:

- St. Blaise blessing of the throats;
- Memories of nuns and convents;
- Praying the rosary in your classroom;
- Saddle shoes and rolled skirts;
- One uniform sportscoat that lasts all year;
- Perfect penmanship;
- Gum on your nose anyone?
- Finishing your lunch because there are poor children starving in mission countries;
- Comparing foreheads on Ash Wednesday;
- Saying Grace before lunch;
- A day off after the bishop visits your school;

- Chapel visits and slipping special intention notes under the statue of the Blessed Mother;
- Lighting a candle;
- Film favorites: “The Trouble with Angels” and “Our Lady of Fatima;”
- Prayer in school... every day, every class;
- Stations of the Cross;
- Knowing all the verses of “Amazing Grace” and “Immaculate Mary;”
- Leaving room for the Holy Spirit.

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Photo: Norwood-Fontbonne Academy

My reflections on what’s missing in our Catholic schools:

I am the product of a lifetime of Catholic education on both sides of the desk. Catholic schools have shaped and molded me into who I am today, and I sincerely believe my life would be much different if not for my Catholic school background. A strong proponent of lifelong learning, my Catholic education includes two grade schools, a high school, undergrad college, grad work at two universities, and countless conferences, webinars, and workshops, along with almost four decades of parish catechetical programs, teaching Theology, directing retreats, and overseeing a busy Campus Ministry office.

So you ask me what’s missing in Catholic schools today? My age is going to show: The good Sisters are missing today. (In most schools, that is.)

The culture of Catholic schools for many generations was wrapped up in the relationships made with the good teaching Sisters. (And at some schools, the teaching Brothers and priests, as in Calvert Hall, Archbishop Curley, and Loyola.)

These women were our teachers, our mentors, our consciences speaking out loud,

our role models, and our friends.

We listened to every word they said. We quoted them to our parents and our friends.... And still do.

They made us put God first in every task we did and every goal we undertook.

They smiled and loved us and exuded joy (most of them anyway...).

When they chastised us, we still knew they loved us.

If they threatened to call our parents, we shaped up immediately.

We aspired to be like them in kindness and humility and peace and dignity.

We saw them as real people who spoke of their families and their lives outside of the classroom.

They encouraged us to consider vocations to the priesthood and religious life. And we did...

We keep in touch with them and are so happy to see them at reunions and Masses and get-togethers.

We pray for those who have gone on to their heavenly reward and tell our children and grandchildren what they meant to our lives.

Through the selfless and devoted service of our good Sisters to our nation's Catholic schools, the tuition costs were kept down and more families could afford to send their children to Catholic grade schools and high schools. Families still scrimped and saved to afford the tuition cost, but it was manageable, even when Mom stayed at home to care for the family.

These good Sisters modeled Catholic identity and our Catholic mission through their presence and their community's charism and their identifying religious habits.

Random people walked up to the good Sisters wherever they were to ask for their prayers and thank them for their vocation. And maybe to slip them a few dollars for

the poor.

And, most importantly, some of these good Sisters were our aunts and cousins and older sisters: We knew them as “real people” who did almost everything we did, who went on vacation to the beach or the mountains with us each summer, who were part of our families...

Today's Catholic schools:

With the absence of the Good Sisters (and Brothers and priests) from so many of our schools today, we rely on the wonderful laymen and women who devote their lives to serving our students. Having served at John Carroll for 33 years now, I know that we laypeople do in fact make a difference and we can have a wonderfully positive impact on our students, no doubt there.

But, in my humble opinion, we cannot make up for the lifelong impact that is missing without the visible witness of the good Sisters. I know that many people could argue with my basic premise here and I certainly do not want to be misunderstood... But the impact of our schools on the lives of our graduates now is completely different than in years past when these consecrated women were in every classroom and whose students hung onto their every word.

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***With special gratitude to the Dominican Sisters who continue to witness
to the girls at Mount de Sales***

Photo: The Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia at Mount de Sales Academy

Vocations crisis:

Yes, times have changed. The world has changed. The Church in some ways has changed. Catholic girls are not seriously considering the possibility of religious life as their grandmothers did in years past. They have many other ways of making a difference in the world now. This generation of high school and college girls has endless options for their futures, options that we did not have in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.

When I was studying Theology in the '70s at Chestnut Hill, located next to the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Philadelphia, there were postulants and novices on campus with their respective distinctive clothing. We saw them regularly, novices at Mass, and postulants in our college classes, along with the wonderful professed Sisters who were our professors and advisors and, again, our role models.



With the decreasing number of women entering religious communities over the past few decades, we see fewer and fewer Sisters in our schools. And with the availability of other ministry options open to women in the Church, many Sisters today are ministering in parishes, for dioceses, and with the poor in social ministries.

My main point here:

You cannot consider that which you do not know. Our Catholic high school and college girls who have never known our good Sisters will not consider a vocation to the religious life. And so the loss of our good Sisters in the classroom continues....

There are no easy answers. Vocations offices and religious communities across our nation are forced to “up their game” in marketing to get the word out about the joys of religious life. The use of Facebook and YouTube videos is now a necessary part of the new marketing for vocations, along with the school visits and personal contact in parishes and on college campuses.

Forming intentional disciples:

The future of our Church depends on the commitment of intentional disciples for Christ. It was easier to form faithful Catholic school students who grew up to be committed Catholic church-going adults when the good Sisters were part of the everyday life of our Catholic schools.

Again, there are no easy answers.

But for many of us in our 50s and 60s and older, these good Sisters are still our role models today. So this Catholic Schools Week I am nostalgic for the committed women who formed and molded me into the woman of faith that I am today.

Special shout out to the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia:

You are in my heart and prayers with much love and gratitude for all you did for me and for all the students at my high school and college:

Ad multos annos!!

Requiescat in pace.