Towson Catholic Closing

The Catholic Review

The past week has been a difficult one for everyone who supports Catholic education in our Archdiocese, most especially those people with ties to Immaculate Conception Church and Towson Catholic High School.

Not unlike other places, people here develop strong emotional and family loyalties to their schools, Catholic and non-Catholic, elementary and high. Thus the reaction we have seen from students, past and present, to the sad announcement that Towson Catholic must close is understandable. In fact, if there wasn't such an outcry, one would have to wonder if the school had failed to make an impact on the lives of its students. After 87 years, it is apparent that TC has meant a great deal to a great many people.

Unfortunately, those same emotions have prevented some from recognizing the honest and concerted efforts of many to save the school from its fate, as well as those factors which played a crucial role in the decision to close Towson Catholic. This has been apparent in the correspondences we have received from supporters of the school, which indicate a number of these myths or misconceptions. I seek to address some of these here in this column.

- *Timing of the decision*. Perhaps the most regrettable aspect of the announcement has been the timing, because of its impact on those most directly affected: students, their families, and faculty/staff. At the end of the previous school year, a budget was created based on an enrollment of 205 students, down from the-then current enrollment of 244. When it became apparent at the beginning of this month that registrations were holding steady at 163 and that the $160,000 in outstanding tuition wasn't being paid down, a decision had to be made. Had the school reopened under such conditions, it would have been out of money by mid-fall, placing a heavy and unfair financial burden on Immaculate Conception Parish. It is regrettable that the decision was not made earlier, but it speaks to the extent to which

the leadership of the parish and school believed in the plan in place to keep the school open, as well as the impact of unprecedented economic forces outside of their control.

- *Parish support*. Though Towson Catholic was governed by its sponsoring parish, Immaculate Conception, for all intents and purposes it ceased functioning as a parish school many years ago. In fact, this past year there were only 17 students from families registered at Immaculate Conception out of 244 students enrolled at the school. In spite of this, the parish held an annual collection to fund the school's endowment and shared its proceeds from the Archbishop's Annual Appeal, providing funding of more than $260,000 for facilities projects and tuition assistance for students.
- *Alumni support*. It is evident that alumni of Towson Catholic have great love for the school. However, the results of their alumni development efforts indicate that this did not always translate to financial support of their alma mater. In fact, of the more than 5,000 living TC alumni, only 185 graduates contributed last year to its annual fund appeal–fewer than 4 percent. Prior to the last round of budget-related personnel cuts, TC had a full-time Alumni Director who worked tirelessly to engage alumni through the planning of various events and fundraisers, such as the TC Spring Fling, scheduled for this past May but cancelled due to poor ticket sales. Only three alumni requested tickets. Unlike the visible signs of financial support of alumni from other Catholic high schools in our Archdiocese, Towson Catholic ceased to be connected to its alumni in a way that was necessary to support the growth of the school's endowment as well as its programs and facilities.
- *Enrollment*. Towson Catholic has suffered from enrollment declines since the mid-1980s. Following the 1985 academic year in which 427 students were enrolled, the school lost 66 students and enrollment continued to drop precipitously into the mid-1990s. For the past decade, enrollment hovered steadily in the mid 200s, never dropping by more than 26 students over any one-year period. Though low, it was stable. Unfortunately, that all changed this past year when the school lost 81 students, about one-third of its total population.
- *Building usage*. Use of Towson Catholic has long been shared by the parish and school. That said, there are currently no plans for how that might

change or for any other possible building. The parish's primary focus at this time is on meeting the needs of Towson Catholic's students and faculty/staff.

In addition to fueling rumors and misconceptions, the emotions brought out by the announcement of the school's closing have prompted many unfair criticisms aimed at the pastor, Msgr. Dennis Tinder. Msgr. Tinder has not only dedicated much of his pastorate to stabilizing and improving the school, but has also made significant personal financial gifts to the school through the years. With a sister and brother having graduated from the school, Msgr. Tinder has suffered personally not only from the pain of the decision, but also from witnessing the protracted impact of the circumstances that forced the decision.

Monsignor Tinder's efforts to save Towson Catholic mirror those of so many of our pastors who have schools struggling to cope with declining enrollment. For these schools that rely solely on tuition for their income, the loss of as few as even 10 children can be catastrophic, so precarious is the situation.

As we work with Towson Catholic's students, teachers, alumni and others in looking forward—to new schools, new jobs, keeping the legacy of TC alive—I pray that we can put our emotions aside and look at the larger issues that led to this sad decision so as to try and prevent the closure—and the attached pain and sense of loss–from claiming yet another of our Catholic schools.