

Pastor's Pen: Beginning Another School Year

It seems like I blinked and three months flew by and we find ourselves back in school. Some of our parishioners have their children in a parish school, some have their children in the local public school, and some of our parishioners home-school. For the latter two groups, their contact with Catholic education comes through CCD programs and confirmation programs. To all of my parents in both parishes and all of the members of both parishes, I am writing today to encourage each of us to this mission of our parishes: the education and Catholic formation of our youth. Whether we have children in any of these opportunities in the parish, we all have a stake in the success of these endeavors.

In last week's homily I introduced a Hebrew word '*haverim*', a word meaning a group of disciples. Our parishes are called to be a *haverim*. Each member of a *haverim* models their lives after the master whom they follow, encourages the best in each other, and give the best of themselves in order to make sure all live up to the standards of the master. As Catholics, our master is Jesus Christ. Collectively, we are His disciples. Together we form a *haverim*. It is natural that this group of disciples should be engaged in the education and formation of the children of the *haverim*. In our parishes, we are engaged and hope to bring about a solid and fruitful program that will assist in this important mission within the Church.

This endeavor is a three-part partnership between parents, teachers, and the parish. We all share in a stake of the outcome of this part of our mission. Bishop McKnight reminds us that the formation of our youth requires sacrifice on all of our parts. When one of those three partners absents themselves from the mission, it is the child who suffers the gravest of the consequences. All three partners must be actively engaged.

The Responsibilities of the Partners: Parents

At your child's baptism, parents repeatedly were instructed that they are to be the first and best teachers of the ways of faith. Parents engage in that mission long before their children set foot into any parish-based program. Parents model the practice of the faith. They are responsible before God with what that message is. Generally (and there are always exception), children pick up the practice of the faith, the importance of the faith, and set their priorities based on what is modeled by their parents. Family life in every aspect, including religious formation, is central to this part of the mission of the Church. Parents who practice and model the faith well, who teach their children to love God and to engage in the mission of the Church, will more often than not have children who will be faithful and capable of passing that same faith on to their children. Parents who are sporadic or neglectful in passing on the Catholic faith will raise another generation of children who will do the same with own children.

When a child hears different things about faith from their teacher and their parents, the odds are that they will follow their parents. When a parent fails to bring their children to Mass every Sunday, when they consistently teach their children to set faith as a low priority, and when they fail to support the parish that is supporting them, then the partnership falls apart. What Catholic education is reduced to is a private education on someone else's dime. It is a taking advantage of the generosity and the investment the parish makes. It undercuts what the teacher is trying to teach. It causes confusion in the children. No one wins.

For this reason, starting with the 2020-2021 academic year, if parents are neglectful in making sure a faithful practice of the faith is happening (particularly weekly Sunday Mass) then the parents will not be able to re-enroll their child in any parish program. The partnership we have is that important and necessary to make sure we effectively carry out the mission of the Church to form new disciples. It is in your own best interest and the long term interest of your children to make sure that Sunday Mass is the norm every week in your family. This is part of the long-term role you play in this essential mission of the Church.

The Responsibilities of the Partners: Teachers and Administrators

Our schools and CCD programs have a responsibility to be sure that what is presented in the name of the Church is solid, truthful, orthodox, and presented to best of our abilities. We have the duty to be sure that what is invested in our programs is well used and turning out young disciples. For our part, our children should not be taught what is contrary to the Catholic faith, but by word and example be shown the same consistent message we ask the parents to give. Communication is essential in this task.

I am pleased that SS Peter and Paul School is starting a discipline protocol called 'Virtue Based Restorative Discipline' which uses disciplinary issues as moments for teaching virtues, eliciting positive future behavior, and doing more than punishing undesired behavior. This is a great step forward in doing more than teaching our children about Catholic principles in their religion class and at Mass, but making clear that the Catholic faith is applicable to every life situation.

Our staff and teachers make sacrifices in teaching for us. They would be able to make more teaching in the public sector. Many of them are parents as well, who do make the same sacrifices of time and energy that we expect of all parents. They lead by example.

The Responsibilities of the Partners: The Parish

The Catholic education of our youth is a core mission of the parish. It is to the long-term good of the future of our parishes that we have well-formed leaders who will pick up where previous generations have born the weight of the mission. The parish has the responsibility of making sure that competent teachers, strong educational materials, safe buildings, and needed volunteers are all available. The parish finances this mission. The parish prays for the good of all involved. The sacrifice the parish makes is in making sure we make available what is needed for the education of our youth.

We have to realize that our school parents are more likely to have more debt than those whose children have long been out of school. While our school parents do have a responsibility to help with fiscal support, those who are better positioned to help should. For many of you, you counted on such people when your children were in school. As a parish, we return that favor by supporting young families when we are in better shape to make the sacrifices necessary. Parents, this means you must respect this kindness and make sure the sacrifices others make for your children's education and formation are being returned by the partnership you have with the school and parish.

Bishop McKnight has said that Catholic education is a sacrifice for all parties. It is a worthy sacrifice. He also says that we must shoot for excellence. The development of our youth into strong and bold Catholic leaders should be something where we pursue excellence in with each of the three partners in this endeavor. Let us begin this school year shooting for this excellence and the bolstering of this partnership. As the saying goes, "When the water rises, all the ships go up."