

The Class of 1951 – in 2009

The picture is fading although it's still possible to make out most of the faces and the inscription *Holy Cross School, Class of 1951*. We were the eighth graders about to become alumni. There were under forty of us.

What an average bunch of pupils we were. Very few of the class had parents with a college education. Most of our families depended on a weekly salary. Not many of our folks had cars. When we traveled it was by trolley or subway, sometimes by bus. A day at Pelham Bay Park's Orchard Beach was an outing. We played made-up games after school and then went home for supper and homework. There was always homework and woe betide us if it was not done.

It's been more than half a century since I graduated from Holy Cross School in the Clason Point section of the Bronx. The older I get, the more I appreciate the education I received there. The lay teachers and the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany ensured that we were prepared in what they proudly declared were the "Four R's:" reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, and religion.

As I look back, I find myself not only grateful for the education I received, but amazed at how much of a foundation for later life was laid in that Grammar School as the parochial school was then called.

When I came across that graduation picture of my class standing with cap and gown grouped on the rectory steps, I began to wonder what became of us. I found that the foundation laid in that Catholic school paid enormous dividends in later life. We have two Doctors, one of whom spent years in India treating the poorest of the poor. There are a handful of lawyers and financial advisors, several nurses, a couple of civil engineers, and a Professor at Johns Hopkins University. There are civil servants, telecommunications workers, transportation specialists, accountants and secretaries. I was the only one to become a priest, but three others among the graduating boys entered the Religious Brothers and taught for years in Catholic High Schools. Two girls entered the Allegany Franciscans and have played leadership roles in that community. We're spread all over the country; very few are in the old neighborhood. The majority of my classmates married and moved away to raise their families, but they carried with them the extraordinary educational foundation they had received in that Bronx parochial school.

Similar stories can be told about Catholic schools throughout the nation's history – not simply way back when, but here in the twenty-first century. In business, in industry, in the law and judiciary, in politics, in telecommunications, in the media, in civil service, in public safety, in all aspects of everyday life, the boys and girls who are the products of a Catholic school education have become men and women who make their mark in society. Catholic school graduates continue to be leaders in our business, civil and church communities. They continue to make a difference. The values on which Catholic education is based become the foundation which helps graduates generation after generation to build a better society. Catholic schools have made, are making, and will continue to make a difference in the lives of their students. And today that Catholic school education is needed more than ever.

In a 2005 document, *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*, the body of United States Bishops reiterated the importance of Catholic schools:

“Catholic schools collaborate with parents and guardians in raising and forming their children as families struggle with the changing and challenging cultural and moral contexts in which they find themselves. Catholic schools provide young people with sound Church teaching through a broad-based curriculum, where faith and culture are intertwined in all areas of a school’s life. By equipping our young people with a sound education, rooted in the Gospel message, the Person of Jesus Christ, and rich in the cherished traditions and liturgical practices of our faith, we ensure that they have the foundation to live morally and uprightly in our complex modern world. This unique Catholic identity makes our Catholic elementary and secondary schools ‘schools for the human person’ and allows them to fill a critical role in the future life of our Church, our country, and our world.”

My prayer is that the numbers and impact of Catholic school graduates in our society may continue and grow.

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