

Diversity in Catholic Schools: Benefits and Opportunities

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In the 2005 statement “Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary & Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium,” the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops highlighted the changing face of the Church and the role of diversity in our Catholic Schools. “Catholic parishes and schools face the challenge of addressing the spiritual, educational, social, and cultural needs of a new wave of immigrants.”

As we go forward to meet this challenge, it is important to remember that diversity has been an integral part of Catholic identity from the beginning. We need only look to Scripture for guidance on the topic. The parable of the Good Samaritan tells us to care for all people. St. Paul accepts the Gentiles as members of the faith when others have rejected them. Christ says to his disciples, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me....” (Matthew 25:35) And our greatest guidance on diversity comes from the very way Christ lived. Diversity is at the heart of His message of love, the message that drives our mission as Catholics.

Christ’s message of love is visible in the daily work of our Catholic Schools as we seek to provide children of all backgrounds an excellent academic education and grounding in the Catholic faith within a safe and nurturing environment. The diversity within our schools not only benefits students but also presents opportunities to serve entire families, strengthen the Church and bring each of us closer to God.

Benefitting Students

Catholic School students have the opportunity to meet children and adults of diverse backgrounds, including people of many races and ethnicities, those with various disabilities, and those of other faiths. As the bishops state: “Catholic schools cultivate healthy interaction among the increasingly diverse populations of our society.”

Serving Families

When we welcome a child from a different culture into our schools, we are helping an entire family make the transition to their new home. Children adapt to new cultures more quickly than adults, which can result in parents being left behind. I was a pastor at Most Holy Redeemer Parish in East Boston, which has a large population of people new to our country. While we extended the hand of welcome to the children at the parish school, we also welcomed the parents, bringing them into the community and helping them to find jobs and housing.

Strengthening the Church

We also help families to sustain their native cultures. Our students study and celebrate the traditions of various racial and ethnic groups. In recognizing the value of the students’ countries of origin, the school is teaching students to respect their heritage and their parents. This helps

families feel more at home, and it also strengthens the Church. Most people pray in their first language. Passing on traditions, culture and language is an effective way of passing on the faith.

Bringing Us Closer to God

Perhaps the greatest benefit of diversity in our schools is that it helps us to better know God. The Vatican's document *Instruction on the Pastoral Care of Migrants*, describes people of different cultures as "a visible sign and an effective reminder of that universality which is a constituent element of the Catholic Church." God is present in each of us. Each different face is another face of God. The better we know and understand each other, the better we know and understand God.

As we go forward to meet the challenges diversity brings to our Catholic Schools, we may do so knowing that the work we are doing has a far-reaching impact, serving students, families, the Church and one another.

References:

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary & Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*, (Washington, D.C.: 2005)

Pontifical Council For the Pastoral Care Of Migrants and Itinerant People, *Instruction, Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi (The Love Of Christ Towards Migrants)*, (Vatican City: 2004)