

Our Catholic Schools: A Treasure for Our Church and Our Society
By Most Rev. Peter A. Rosazza, D.D.

Some years ago I became friendly with Marion Hepburn Grant, sister of Catherine Hepburn and mother of Catherine Houghton, who was a long time resident of West Hartford. She confided to me that as a Protestant and community activist, she felt that Catholic schools were a divisive element in society.

Sometime later she became aware of the work of Catholic schools and wrote an op-ed article in *The Hartford Courant* entitled "I am a Converted Bigot". In the article she praised Catholic schools for three points: formation of students in moral values, excellent education accomplished at one third-the cost of public education, and effective education and formation of students who live at the poverty level. I was elated that she had come to this conclusion and for pointing out to the general public the value of our schools.

In doing so she echoed a point about which Archbishop Mansell frequently reminds us, that the Catholic school educates a child with excellence at a significantly lower cost. The Catholic schools system saves the general community \$400,000,000 each year. Furthermore, the efficiency of the Catholic school system was underscored by the *Moe-Chubb Report* produced by two social scientists and used as the intellectual basis for vouchers proposed by President George Herbert Walker Bush. Mr. Chubb gave a lecture to a group of Catholic bishops at which I was present. He made us aware that the public schools have a huge bureaucracy whereas our systems do not. For example, the central office of the New York City School System provides one administrator for every 200 students. The central office of the Catholic system in the Archdiocese of New York provides one administrator for every 4,200 students in that system.

The success of Catholic education in poverty areas is a well established fact. As stated in the pastoral letter, *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium, June 2005*, our schools make a "major impact in closing the achievement gap for poor and minority students in inner city environments. We have a lower dropout rate (3.4%) than both public (14.4%) and other private schools (11.9%)." The text then refers to a study produced by Harvard University and issued in the year 2000. It states that Catholic school students performed better than other students on the three basic objectives of civic education; the capacity for civic engagement or voluntary community service, political knowledge or learning, and using civic skills and political tolerance or respect for opinions different from their own. This defeats the old canard we so often hear that Catholic schools produce narrow-minded students.

In the context of the success of our schools in poor areas I wish to advocate for our Hispanic/Latino young people, a population with whom I have worked for the past 39 years. First, our pastoral letter says that it is "critical for us to work with our people to erase any lines of prejudice and bias that may exist, and create welcoming communities for these immigrants". Though there are many recent immigrant nationalities, the Hispanics/Latinos constitute the largest, making up 39% of the Catholics in our country and 44% of Catholics under the age of 10! Just as our Catholic schools have educated immigrant communities in the past, helping catapult them into the middle class in less than two generations, so it is my hope, and that of our bishops, that we can do the same for these people. Moreover we applaud our pastors and bishops in their efforts to encourage Hispanics/Latinos to join school boards both on the parish and diocesan levels.

Now to Marion's realization about our schools and moral values. In our text we say, "By equipping our young people with a sound education, rooted in the gospel message, the person of Jesus Christ, and the cherished Catholic traditions and liturgical practices of our faith, we ensure that they have the foundation to live morally and uprightly in our complex modern world."

Integral to this formation is an ever deepening knowledge of our rich Catholic social tradition. It focuses on the Prophets of Israel and on Jesus Christ, who is rooted in that culture. It calls on students to become increasingly respectful of their own inestimable dignity and that of each and every human being. It then joins this awareness to that of solidarity with every woman and man on earth. This connection is essential and protects against self-centeredness and selfishness. To paraphrase Descartes and quote Albert Camus, "I suffer, therefore we are." From our dignity flow human and God-given rights such as the right to life, food, shelter, clothing, education, basic medical care, and work. These and many others are found in one of the most important documents ever written, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948. Several years later, Pope John XXIII reflects on them in his Encyclical, *Pacem in Terras (Peace on Earth)*. He stresses the fact that revolution and war often erupt when human rights are not respected. From solidarity emanates the option for the poor, a concept contained in the Bible that has become more evident to us in recent times. Just as God stood with the poor in The Old Testament and Jesus in The New Testament, so must we in our times.

Catholic school students not only study Catholic social teachings but more importantly put them into practice through their service projects. Thus students have the opportunity to experience poverty first hand, and, guided by their teachers, ask the question, "Why are these people poor?" This is a far more complex question, which students who are immersed in Christ centered, person connected environments of Catholic schools seek to answer through faith and love of Jesus. It echoes what my friend, the late Archbishop Helder Câmara of Brazil used to say, "When I feed the hungry, they call me a saint. When I ask why people are hungry, they call me a Communist."

What a treasure our Catholic schools are for our church and our society! I offer my humble and heartfelt expression of thanks to superintendents, teachers, staffs, volunteers, and all others who support them. Saint Iranaeus of Lyon, who died in the year 200, once proclaimed that "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." Thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit, our Catholic schools work tirelessly and hopefully to produce students desirous of reaching that ideal.