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Our Catholic Schools: A Crisis of Faith

by Paul Santos



I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; lo, I have not restrained my lips, as thou knowest, O LORD. (Psalms 40:9)

Let the children come to me; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. (Mark 10:14)

Some years back I joined a committee formed to save our local Catholic elementary school. Our school suffered from declining enrollment, poor morale, and, most critically, from insufficient funds to finish the school year. The reasons justifying this abject state of affairs were many. They ranged from the vague assertion that times have changed, to the broad justification that our Catholic communities simply could no longer afford Catholic schools, and, more narrowly, to specific charges implying simple mismanagement. I suspect this scenario is not unique but repeats itself with minor variations throughout many of our Catholic school systems.

The committee formed to save our school acknowledged these reasons, but looked deeper. Why did Catholic schools once thrive when people were actually poorer than they are today, when people didn't have wide screen televisions, when entertainment piped into our homes through cable networks was not considered an essential utility, when our children did not each have personal phones they carried everywhere, and when even our cars, like our lives were much simpler? Our community is a small city in a rural area with a population that is largely Catholic. At the time of my initial involvement there were four parishes within an easy driving distance of no more than three miles from our one regional school. If even one quarter of the Catholic population put their children in our school it would have thrived.

What the committee saw was that the Catholic community, neither pastor nor parishioner, no longer took ownership of its schools. The churches reluctantly contributed what the diocese demanded. The pastors begged off further support, financial or moral, claiming that the school was just a private academy benefiting few. They pointed to many problems, problems that ranged from financial need, to administrative incompetence, and even to students who did not know how to behave in Mass. Parishioners shared these views and saw the school as something solely for the parents of the students enrolled. Parishioners believed that the schools had nothing to do with them. Both parishioners and pastors were correct in their assessments. When we no longer see our schools as integral to our faith, they become orphans lost in the wilderness of the secular world, taking direction from wherever they can find it. Our school had a financial crisis compounded by poor business practices, but the real problem, and one I believe is endemic to many of our Catholic schools, was and is a crisis of faith.

In our attempts to find the best business model for our Catholic schools we have forgotten that our schools are a faith based business. Our capital is the faith we put into them. When that capital dries up, our schools wither and become something other than what they should be. Our student population declines, our funds dry up, and parishioners and pastors see little reason to support the schools. Even more tragically, our schools lose their way in the morass of academic excellence at the expense of their evangelical mission. We should know we have reached a crisis of faith when we seek guidance from marketing experts singing a siren's song assuring us that our faith belongs in them. We should know we have reached a crisis of faith when we see the salvation of our schools in the wealthy donor rather than in the body of faithful who comprise our church. We should know we have a crisis of faith when our eyes no longer focus on Jesus as the sole purpose for our schools. But we don't, because to do so will require us to change.

I believe that the beginning to the end of our problems with our Catholic schools begins when we see the problem as a crisis of faith and we respond to it as a community of faith. Our response will not only change our schools. It will change us. It will change both parishioner and pastor. It will require our pastors to see that God responds to their faith through their parishioners. It will require parishioners to see that their faith reveals resources previously unseen. It will require all to see that our schools are an expression of our faith and a gift, both to our children and to ourselves as a community. And it requires all to see that it is the faith of the community that is the anchor that keeps our schools truly Catholic, where we see Jesus as "the truth, the way, and the life."

The call to faith in our communities must be mirrored with a call to faith in our schools. We must be able to answer the following questions: Why should we have Catholic schools? Why should Catholics support our Catholic schools? Why should our pastors justify our Catholic schools to their parishioners? Why should Catholic parents, or parents of any faith, send their children to Catholic schools? The answer to all of these questions is that our schools are integral to our Catholic faith. They are one of the tools the Church uses to bring Christ's message of salvation to all. Our schools are a simple reflection of the Church's very reason to be. But we can only answer in this way if they are truly Christ centered and truly evangelical.

In a school so centered, academic excellence is necessarily correlative to the evangelical goal of the school, but it cannot be its guiding principle. The goal of the school is to lead students to Christ. To see their talents as given by God is to see that they must be returned to God fully developed.

This requires the highest academic standards. To accept less than excellence would not be Catholic. But leading with academic excellence as our primary appeal pushes Christ aside. We will find ourselves conveying an ambivalent message to prospective parent and student, "Yes, we are Catholic. But you don't need to worry about that." Or as one marketing expert assured us, "You don't need to mention Catholic in your marketing. People already know that." The clear implication was that we

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don't want to scare anybody away. The pursuit of academic excellence, rather than the formation of saints, as the product we need in order to sell our schools in today's marketplace will compel compromise. To think that we can bait with academics and then switch in Christ diminishes both the school and Christ. Such an appeal is a reflection not on the faith of our potential clients but on our own faith. When we think our schools can be Christ-centered on the inside and worldly-wise on the outside, we will be serving two masters. Jesus, himself, made it clear this was not possible. When we don't lead with our faith we will find ourselves hiding Christ behind one door after another. We will be serving the wrong master. Despite our best intentions, like the ever well-intended St. Peter, we will deny Christ.

When we fear an open proclamation of the message of Jesus Christ, we truly have entered a crisis of faith. If the apostles had shown such reticence the church would have died with Jesus on the cross. Our faith is evident when we lead with Jesus Christ, not furtively, not stealthily, not even quietly but with the compelling confidence of a people who have been given the truth and understand that to spread that truth is to truly love your neighbor, whoever he or she may be and from whatever background they come. This is the mission of the church, to bring the message of salvation to all, not just those who won't take offense. This should be the mission of our schools. When we try to hide this we become like Jonah, we run, we hide, or we board a ship going anywhere but where we have been called to go. We think that God couldn't really have chosen us to spread his message.

We look on our neighbors as either undeserving of the truth or simply unready to receive the truth we hold. I believe we have become like Jonah with our Catholic schools. We won't trumpet our faith because we believe it will turn people off. We think we need something slicker, something more comfortable, something that doesn't call for real change. Like Jonah, we think others either don't deserve the Word passed on to us or are simply not ready for it. When we hide our message, we hide our faith. Faith hidden is no faith at all. We cannot rally our communities in faith to a message they cannot see. Like pastor and parishioner, our schools must change in faith. They must become what we should be.

To see the problem is to realize that the solution is not an easy one. Where we are comfortable we must become uncomfortable. To see the problem as a crisis of faith is to see that the solution is a changed life. This is not an easy sell for either pastor, parishioner, or our schools. I believe the solution begins with an honest discussion within our Catholic communities of who we are as Catholics and how our schools must reflect that vision. We might begin those discussions with a book by Archbishop Miller, CSB, entitled The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools. If our local schools are failing and we simply continue to point our fingers at them as responsible for their own fate, rather than at ourselves, then we have missed something important. If we don't claim personal and communal responsibility our schools will continue to fail or they will become something no longer truly Catholic.

The mission statement guiding the schools of the Diocese of Wichita is unequivocal and provides an example that clearly leads the way:

"Together with the family, the parish and each other, we will FORM EACH STUDENT INTO A DISCIPLE OF JESUS CHRIST Who seeks the Truth, grows to love It, And learns to live It." [Their caps, not mine.]

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