

Editorial: Gift taken for granted

Catholic schools blossomed in the United States in the early 20th century as a way of equipping young Catholics to deal with rampant anti-Catholicism. If you live long enough, the saying goes, everything happens twice. And as the Church in the United States observes Catholic Schools Week from Jan. 27-Feb. 2 this year, it's good that Catholics, especially parents of school-age kids, remember that this resource is there to assist them in their responsibility to teach and form their children.

After a brutal year for the Church arising from ongoing revelations of clergy sexual abuse, the notion of an entire system of Catholic institutions expressly built for the purpose of serving children may seem like the punchline of a bad joke. And when nearly 20 percent of the 2 million students currently enrolled in Catholic schools are not Catholic (per data from the National Catholic Educational Association), one can surmise that only a slim minority of U.S. Catholics even takes advantage of the offerings of Catholic schools.

This is a shame, not only because a time of duress for the Church is precisely when Catholics should be redoubling their investment in the ministries and outreach of their Church, but because of the riches Catholic education has bestowed – and continues to bestow – on millions of people.

Catholic schools are a source of catechesis, not only for the students who attend them, but for entire families, with parents, grandparents and others benefitting from the experience.

And with so many non-Catholic students enrolled in them, Catholic schools provide an evangelizing element to many young

people who would otherwise never have heard the Gospel.

For Catholic and non-Catholic students alike, Catholic education leaves an indelible mark, not only in terms of the quality of the education received, but in terms of the personal values one can't shake, even when a person journeys far away from those roots.

Students are exposed to the values of the Faith, something evident in widespread participation in pro-life marches, service projects and other initiatives. Students benefit from the models of service provided by teachers, administrative staff, chaplains, campus ministers and others who walk the path of faith alongside them and contribute deeply to the Catholic character of their educational environment.

Catholic schools foster vocations by forming young men and women who understand their faith, are serious about it, and who love the Church and wish to serve it more deeply.

This is all an incredible gift. Though human nature is to take good things for granted, Catholics should not take Catholic schools for granted, in good times or in bad.

Sadly, we find ourselves once again in a time of widespread hostility toward the Church and toward those who take their Catholic Faith seriously. Our reverence for the dignity of every human life is widely derided and makes us subjects of suspicion from all sides. Our insistence on the Gospel and the truth it contains is dismissed by young people at an increasingly earlier age, as they cease to consider themselves Catholic – or even religious – before even taking the time to understand what those identities even mean.

The Church is a community. Faith is a communal reality. We never face our difficulties alone, thanks to God and to one another. And Catholic schools – perhaps better than any other entity – help take the embrace and practice of the Faith beyond Sunday and more deeply into our lives.

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