

**THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**  
**Year C     January 27, 2013**

**Theme: Catholic Schools Week**

Weirton in 1924 was a very different place than it is today.

The mills of Mr. E.T. Weir & Company were belching thick clouds of smoke night and day with three shifts of workers needed to fire the furnaces, run the trains and load finished products.

Steady streams of immigrants from Poland, Ireland, Slovakia, Italy, Africa – many of our grandparents and parents -- walked north on Main Street from the train station down at Wheeling Junction to the Personnel Office, all promised jobs in the smoking behemoth.

There was no city of Weirton back then, just the community gathered way up north around the main gates of the mill – the stores, the barbers and grocers and dry cleaners, and the churches and the brand spanking new St. Paul Grade School just built near the Triangle and already covered in black graphite dust from the mill.

Within only a dozen years of becoming a parish and only eight years after completing a church building, the Catholics of Weirton had raised sufficient funds and built their children a Catholic Grade School.

Not only that, but with the help of Bishop John J. Swint, they had recruited the Servants of Mary Sisters to come and teach their children in the school.

Some thirty years later, the Catholics of Weirton added Madonna Catholic High School to their educational ministries.

Now eighty-eight years later and with St. Paul Grade School at a new location, religious women gone from our midst and Weirton in a dramatically different situation, the educational ministry of our parish continues.

St. Paul Grade School has 270 students from our Age 3 Pre-School Program through Grade 8, by State of West Virginia standards very nearly at capacity.

Of that number two thirds are Catholics.

Madonna High School has about 180 students, of whom 32 are sponsored by St. Paul Parish.

All over the United States we observe Catholic Schools week and have an opportunity to reflect on our history, our goals and the current practice of our schools ministry.

This educational ministry parallels the ministry we heard of the priest/scribe Ezra in the Book of Nehemiah and that of Jesus himself in the Gospel of Luke.

It parallels in purpose but not in form: allow me to explain.

Ezra the priest had accompanied his people home from exile in Babylon and had worked with them to complete the protective walls of the city of Jerusalem.

Now he stood up on a wooden platform to read the ancient law and traditions to, as the text so beautifully phrased it, **“the men, the women and the children old enough to understand”** and then taught them those laws and traditions.

Similarly, Jesus at his home town synagogue began his teaching ministry by unrolling what was probably a sheepskin scroll and reading to an audience of mostly illiterate peasants and taught them God’s call to social justice.

Both Jesus and Ezra as teachers were completely limited in the educational tools available to them - though undoubtedly Ezra like Jesus used graphic stories in his teaching.

But neither had multi-copies of color workbooks, nor self-paced computer programs, nor smart boards, nor i-pads, nor common-core guidelines, nor six and seven year olds who could read, nor research data instantly available.

Yet, despite all these technological advantages and opportunities the questions still remain: will our children have faith?

Will they learn and apply Christian values in their jobs and civic lives to shape a more just and humane world?

If they grow up simply to be richer, more successful, happier then we will have failed as Christian parents and as the Church because our job – what we promised to do at their baptism – is to bring them up as Christ taught to love God and their neighbor.

Catholic schools are about formation in Christian values so our children will grow into men and women able to live those values in their world.

Let me share with you an example of one concrete way St. Paul Grade School is creating an atmosphere where these Christian values and virtues are shared.

Each month a particular virtue is lifted up and highlighted for attention by everyone in the school.

Throughout the building this virtue is posted; teachers refer to it in particular stories and lessons; students, staff and teachers are “caught” practicing that particular virtue.

Then each month we recognize at our school mass one or two students in each grade as well some adults who especially demonstrated that virtue.

This past Wednesday was recognition day for “Empathy or Compassion” – would you believe we had winners in Kindergarten and First Grade where those are really big words through eighth grade where we found a particularly empathetic boy!

Empathy, compassion – seriously Christian virtues, virtues that we must help our young internalize if they are to become effective Christians in the world of tomorrow.

Finally, my most serious concern as a pastor regarding our Catholic schools is not the quality of education, nor money, nor facilities.

My concern is the significant drop off in the number of Catholic families regularly participating in Sunday worship.

I don't say this to be judgmental but in an effort to understand why Sunday Mass is not meeting the spiritual needs of younger parents and their children: what are we doing wrong or not doing? What could we do better?

I am so afraid the United States is becoming like nations in Europe where only a small fraction of a Catholics ever worship except for an occasional wedding and a funeral, usually their own.

If Catholic schools exist to help form our children in the faith and values of faith, then for Catholics the Eucharist is central, pivotal to that faith.

Without the Eucharist there can be no Catholic faith, so critical is it to what Catholicism is all about.

So why do we go to great lengths and expense to give our children a "Catholic Education" but not regularly bring them for Sunday Eucharist?

I sincerely would like to know the answer to this question – again not to be judgmental but to understand.

Fuller, more meaningful understanding of and participation in this Eucharist is surely one of the goals of our educational ministry.

Realizing the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist is the Food and Drink that will give us the spiritual energy to survive and succeed in the struggle for justice in the world is surely a lesson we want them to learn from us.

My sisters and brothers, if we teach our children anything then it must be that in the assembly of the Eucharist, in the Word of God and in the Body and Blood of Christ they will find the power they need to live the faith in a complex world.

If they don't learn this, we really will be able to say we gave them a "Catholic" education?