

Catholic Schools Week 2019

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I attended a public school for kindergarten, then three successive Catholic elementary schools due to family moves. Each provided welcome experiences before I migrated to a small Catholic high school. My religious education flourished, and it was open to other traditions. As a well-known finance magazine once reported, it restarted its coverage of religious events because one could not understand economics without it. I remain convinced that an advantage of Catholic schools, at least in principle, is that we can teach about a larger, inclusive world. We touch upon topics of religious, environmental, artistic, scientific and political importance. Imagine omitting one of these while aspiring to educate “the whole student.”

This does not mean that Catholic schools are all-around better than other schools. Our Catholic teachers and pupils at other kinds of schools know this. But, our Church-sponsored schools should be different in their “catholic” approach. The dictionary defines that word as “all embracing.” Perhaps the first words of the 1965 Second Vatican Council Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World describe it best: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.”

Our ability — indeed our mission — to teach about the divine, the spiritual and eternal, informs all of what we do in academic, athletics and co-curricular activities. We do this because of who we are, and also because of the natural questioning by young people with a dawning sense of the spiritual.

Donna Freitas, a university professor who pays attention to what young people talk about and read, wrote about this questioning. She says that while 90 percent of protagonists in young adult literature “claim no religious or spiritual identity,” that statistic “does not align with the real lives of American teenagers” (New York Times Books, Dec. 30, 2018).

Freitas strikes a particular note with me. My classes in elementary and secondary school did not depend solely on religion textbooks, AV or chapel time to open the way to a catholic experience. The sciences and the arts played a big part. When I think of the novels, plays and histories that I read, both assigned and chosen, they might not make it into today’s Christian book section at stores. But their authors helped me to imagine how God might see us, as noble and flawed. To see what Christ might see in us, and love us anyway. And this is a part of anyone’s best efforts to

educate, especially ours. We make it our mission to ponder the question posed to God in Psalm 8: “What are humans that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you care for them?”

Our schools are laboratories for mindfulness and care, taking us into the world and not away from it. For some of the same reasons that Christ came into the world.