

# A Glance Through the Catholic School Scrapbook

By Father Kris D. Stubna

In the June 30, 1921, edition of the *Pittsburgh Catholic*, Father Thomas Coakley expressed the hopes of the Church of Pittsburgh 40 years hence. He spoke of a diocese that boasted a number of accomplishments, "not the least of which was an outstanding system of schools, in every strategic place of the city and the diocese, majestic piles of buildings, stately and imposing in their mass and line, scientifically equipped and staffed with the ablest teachers, clerical and lay, that the diocese and country could afford, and each filled with thousands of pupils ... and that by their numbers, their skill, their undeniable intellectual attainments, and their solid education, so impressed the community, that it was almost impossible to build schools rapidly enough, so great was the throng anxious to enter them, to receive under Catholic teachers a solid and brilliant education."

What a marvelous dream — a dream that has become a reality in some respects. But a dream that must be kept alive in the hearts of the faithful if we are to fulfill our role in bringing about the Kingdom of God.

The pages of history can help us to keep the dream alive. Come with me, then, through the old bound volumes of the *Pittsburgh Catholic* as I search out answers to the burning questions about Catholic education.

## 1. *Why do we have Catholic Schools?*

The mission of Catholic schools has been clear from the beginning. In the July 10, 1858, edition, an article highlights the regular half-yearly examinations of the schools run by the Sisters of Mercy: "The pupils in the various classes exhibited, generally, a solid and thorough knowledge of their subjects thereby proving the patient and successful efforts of the good Sisters, who, with singleness of purpose, devote their time and their exertions to the work of their instruction. It was particularly gratifying to

witness the thorough knowledge of the Christian Doctrine displayed by most of the pupils — a knowledge which we are inclined to think many persons of a far more advanced age and who claim more than an average share of general intelligence, might well envy. The religious and moral training which the children here receive, render these schools a blessing to the Catholic community not easily appreciated to its fullest extent. It is this which gives education its true value, as it should ever form its groundwork."

In October 1916, several articles exhort parents to provide Catholic education for their children: "We need men who know life and its duties, and are prepared to meet them. We need Christians who understand religion and are ready to comply with its obligations. We need good citizens who realize that the public and private morality are based upon the same ten commandments and that what is morally wrong can never be politically right. We need honesty in public as well as in private life... Therefore send your sons and daughters to Catholic schools. Give them the best. That best, in so far as your children are concerned, is to be found only within the walls of Catholic schools. To send them elsewhere is to give them less than their right, for they have a right to be prepared."

In 1917, the paper published an educational creed to be held by all the faithful: "We believe in letting Christ have his children every day in the week. We believe the knowledge of God is a blessing and a necessity for all ages and all persons. We believe that morality cannot be taught without religion because religion gives the foundation, the sanction, the motive, and the power to morality. We believe the Catholic faith is the most precious inheritance, the most vital and essential possession we can bequeath to our

children. We believe that the Catholic Church is commanded by Christ to teach religion from our baptism to our extreme unction. Our forefathers were ready to sacrifice their lives for their religion and the Catholic education of their children. Their generosity has made us what we are. We educate one million and a half of our children, thus saving the nation thirty million dollars from the tax bill, besides four hundred million dollars for school houses. And 50,000 of our sisters give their life work for Catholic education. God is pleased with the Catholics of America because they have worked to bring the children to Christ's feet."

Bishop Boyle on January 20, 1944, wrote of the need for Catholic schools amid the Second World War: "It has been repeatedly pointed out that the success of the Nazi regime in Germany in building a war machine of relentless efficiency, derived largely from the educational system through which it had passed a generation of German youth: a system which convinced the individual he was an unquestioning slave of the state, with no ideals higher than obeying implicitly the orders of the Leader. We can see what a debasing, destructive thing such a system becomes when carried to its logical conclusion, and we cannot miss realizing that our own country's school program has been drifting alarmingly in the same direction. The Nazis rigorously excluded all teachings of religion or personal morality; they eliminated all notions of man's dependence on God; making his duty to the nation his sole concern, they robbed him of human dignity and of the enjoyment of liberty. We would do well to consider how dangerously similar were the results our own educators were approaching. By insisting on schools without religion, they were making materialism the great objective ... [But] true education, the sort upon which a better

world can be built, is an education which foster's man's spiritual fineness, as well as his mental and physical talents."

These words are strikingly similar to those of Bishop Donald Wuerl, in a 1995 article titled "What Is Wrong with this Picture?" decrying the modern insistence on separating religion from culture. Apparently, not much has changed in 50 years. Thus, Catholic schools continue to offer hope amid what Pope John Paul II has described as a "culture of death."

## 2. What is taught in Catholic schools?

For most of their 150 years, local Catholic schools were seen as the primary institution for teaching the faithful. This led to interesting debates about what exactly should be taught in our schools, by whom and how. In January 13, 1944, Father Justin Field of the Diocesan Church Music Commission wrote, "Since the principal training ground of the faithful is the school, in the school, therefore, the teaching of Gregorian music is obligatory. Thus it becomes a matter of conscience that some teachers at least are trained to become qualified to teach it." From there he goes on to insist that every school send one teacher to New York University for a degree in a recently instituted program in chant!

Then there are the "extra-curriculars." Consider a sampling from the pages of Jan. 27, 1944:

"Annunciation High School, North Side, formally opened its library to the parish last Sunday with a program conducted by Mary Kirby. Gloria Fanning reviewed the recent best seller 'What Other Answer?' Virginia Cleary discussed 'The Precis of the Bible.' Mary Lou Hurley summarized the wartime poem entitled, 'Life in London.' And Mary Weis gave a 'Toast to the Book Log.'"

"Responding to the call of the Holy Father for prayers for peace, the freshmen of St. Raphael's High School have formed a prayer club."

"In line with the Schools-At-War program the Victory Corps of St. Rosalia's High School conducted tin

and paper salvage campaigns during the past week. The paper collected weighed 11,000 pounds, while approximately 10,000 tin cans were turned in."

In May 11, 1961, we read that high school and elementary students are involved in a variety of mission programs. "The mission-minded high school student does his bit for the Society of St. Peter the Apostle by praying for vocations both at home and in school, as well as by making a personal sacrifice of at least 50 cents for the education and training of seminarians ... in the elementary schools the children save their pen-

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nies and give them to the Holy Father through the Holy Childhood Adoption Program which cares for children in the missions."

An interesting discussion was noted in June 3, 1961, concerning who plays better basketball, public or Catholic schools. Apparently a number of chaps in the public realm were insisting that only two Catholic players made the first three teams on All-State because of the "lousy" brand of play in Catholic schools. Came the answer: "we believe teams in the diocese can match those of public schools ... they do not play 'lousy' ball. It also should be considered that only half of the schools in the diocese have their own gyms. A most important factor."

## 3. Who should pay for Catholic schools?

In October 1916 the Catholic issued a serious warning to laymen. "The State has no more right to say what kind of an education the child

shall get than to say what kind of food the child shall eat. The State has a right as well as a duty to help impoverished parents to support and educate their children, but always with the provision that the child shall not be robbed of his religion, and that the child shall get that brand of education his parents want him to have."

But paying for Catholic schools was not seen as a problem — or so Bishop Boyle repeatedly claimed: "The parochial school is of paramount importance in the proper education of the young. Every member of the Church realizes this and for this reason no sacrifice of money or inconvenience is considered too great to secure this boon." (June 30, 1921). In this light, Bishop Wuerl's message, with new financing policies and the Bishop's Education Fund, can hardly be seen as something out of place.

As the debate unfolded in the Kennedy administration — whose policies proved devastating to Catholic schools — concerning the use of federal monies for parochial schools, Bishop Wright remarked: "A government mindful of the purposes of the Constitution will resist pressures which would destroy educational freedom and will devise means of equitably meeting the problems of taxpayers and of schools living under a Constitution with a Preamble thus magnanimous and just." (April 6, 1961).

But one thing was clear from the earliest days. In the 1858 newspapers, a number of ads touted schools with fees and tuitions listed (including laundry service) — and each was clearly marked, "payable in advance."

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It's nice to take a wistful walk through history, evoking days of sisters in long habits and schools filled with 60 students in each grade. But what then? Are these merely relics left to collect dust?

No. These clippings, these people, *speak to us* from the pages of the past.

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# ^ Giant Named John Wright

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memories of him would vanish with them. These memories demanded to be recorded for those yet unborn, men and women the Cardinal would never know but whose good he held passionately at heart. That the convictions of this great churchman would be lost to posterity, that delight in this man would never be known and enjoyed by future generations, seemed to me a cruel deprivation.

Is there an equivalent of *pietas* toward those yet to be born? If there is, I felt bound to pay them that debt.

What qualifies me to write this book? I had known Wright in Rome during the years of the Second Vatican Council, and from

the time he returned in 1969 as Prefect of the Clergy Congregation until my return to the United States in 1974, found myself on intimate terms with him.

Here I should make it clear that I was far from the only person of inconsequence whom Wright brought into his confidence. Great and small won his sincere and passionate interest. Appreciation of the immense import of each and every person was integral to his faith. I happen to have met two men who claimed to be his best friend, undoubtedly for good reason, and have read the same claim by a woman; I am told there are literally dozens more, and believe they are far from deluded.

What I am convinced brought us close together was our shared conviction — tragically uncommon in those terrible years — that contraception was the pivot on which sexual morality, hence family solidity, hence again social stability, would turn. On his return to Rome in 1969, Cardinal Wright referred obliquely but unmistakably to an essay I had published making this claim; it had appeared

shortly before Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the Church's millennial condemnation of contraception. This gave us a unity of purpose that, once again, makes the writing of his memoir a duty not to be shirked.

Nor can I exaggerate the role that the Church's stand on contraception played in what must be called the drama of his final years. He died in 1979, aged 70, blind and scarcely able to move, after years of physical suffering. Yet the moral pains he bore after the See of Peter — to which he was utterly devoted — had reaffirmed

*His persona was larger than life: eloquent, deliciously witty, and with ways that were more than winning.*

the Church's condemnation of contraception, pains he endured because he supported that millennial tradition and the See that reaffirmed it, were far worse.

This most lovable man was literally a martyr — the word means witness — to purity of marriage. He knew its desecration is a stain on modern society outdone in ugliness only by the murder of countless millions, including the littlest of children. He knew that society might seem to be in its death throes, but that so long as the living cell, that "little church" known as the family, held firm by maintaining that lifelong devoted marriage which is its foundation, a new society would be born, all the stronger for remembering what strove to destroy it. And if the memory of that champion of the family, of husbands and wives and little children, somehow remains, the family and the broader society will be all the stronger. I could not in conscience, then, fail to undertake this book on John Cardinal Wright.

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## Catholic Schools Then and Now

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They have something to say as we make our decisions, live our lives and strive to fulfill the mission the Church has given to every age.

Our Catholic ancestors would teach us the values of sacrifice, parental responsibility, Catholic identity, school choice and citizenship.

If we fail to heed the history of our schools, we will not have the privilege of repeating it.

*Father Stubna is diocesan secretary for education and co-author of What Catholics Believe: A Pocket Catechism (Our Sunday Visitor, 1999). This article is condensed from the address he gave to the Catholic Historical Society on Feb. 4, 1996.*

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