

"As regards our school here, it is now in good condition"

Writing from his mission at L'Arbre Croche in 1832 (located between Cross Village and Harbor Springs) Bishop Baraga (*at that time Father Baraga*) entered into his journal: "*As regards our school here, it is now in good condition. We have more than 60 pupils, boys and girls; the boys are instructed by Mr. L'Etourneau of Detroit... [and] Mrs. Fisher of Mackinac is conducting the girls' school. For an hour every day all the boys and girls are assembled and instructed by me in religion.*"

The cause for this optimistic tone: a one room school house, sixty children, two instructors and a priest teaching religion. At the time this accomplishment was nothing less than heroic considering the harsh realities of winter, the rugged geography and the obstacles of language and culture. I suppose 60 students is a large number when you start from zero and grow. However, 60 students does not seem so large if you start with 200 and shrink.

And yet if one were to study the ebb and flow of the school enrollments within our diocese they might be surprised at what they would find. For example, an enrollment history for one of our schools from 1963 through 2010 reveals a high of 190 students in 1968 and a low of 55 students in 1986. Although the average enrollment for these years is 101 students, 23 out of the 47 years calculated had enrollments under 100 students and the average enrollments of those 23 years was approximately 83 students. Another school in the diocese recently was concerned that their enrollment had dropped to 60 students and yet, after reading a history of the school, it was discovered that the school opened 50 years ago with an enrollment of -- you guessed it -- 60 students.

So what does it take to make a Catholic school worth the investment? If you look to the past for answers you will find that schools historically have been a powerful tool that the Church has used for both formation and evangelization. In years past the attitude was not so much how can we afford to have a Catholic school as it was how can we afford not to? It does not appear that there was a magic number for enrollment that would determine whether or not there was enough interest to go to the trouble of starting a school.

In 1883 the Marywood Dominican Sisters opened Holy Angels Academy in Traverse City. The Academy celebrated its first high school commencement in the spring of 1889 with a graduating class of -- are you ready for this -- *three*.

In 1832 the desire to evangelize made 60 students a rather large number while in 2010 complacency makes 60 seem small. We now live in a culture that is increasingly hostile toward Christianity; a culture that preaches tolerance for indignity; that truth is relative and cannot possibly be determined. We need now more than ever to teach respect for the real and substantial presence of our Lord in the Eucharist; that truth exists and should be sought. Bishop Baraga may have been hindered by harsh conditions, geography and lack of resources, but we in this present age are handicapped by apathy and pervasive relativism. Our call to evangelize is as noble and challenging today as it was for our beloved great missionary Bishop Baraga.

Matthew Kelly writes in his book *Rediscovering Catholicism* that "The Church, like so many other things in life, is not something we inherit from generations past or take over from our predecessors. The Church is on loan to us from future generations." The need for evangelization is constant and desperately required in this present age. We cannot talk about Bishop Baraga and say, "Look what he did, we have buildings everywhere," as if the task is somehow complete. As the numbers of parishioners in those buildings dwindle it should become increasingly evident that simply attempting to maintain what has been "*passed on*" to us is the wrong attitude. "The Church is on loan to us from future generations." Evangelization *is* the work of the Church and it is needed as much now as it was 100 years ago.

So what statistically is the most successful tool that the Catholic Church has used to evangelize? Schools. Other religions understand this as well. Google *The Islamic Foundation of North America* and read that their goal is “to enable schools, teachers and parents to present Islam and its worldview in a logical, faithful and complete way with the idea that the young will better be able to integrate their spiritual tradition in a variety of societal contexts.” The New York Times reported on November 10, 1998 that “in 1995 fewer than 200 children in New York City and Long Island attended private Islamic schools, but by 1998 total enrollment had grown to 2,400 students spread among 13 schools, with the majority of students from immigrant families.” Today The Islamic Association of New York lists 18 schools in New York City and Long Island with a total of 25 schools throughout the state.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, between the 1999–2000 and 2005–06 school years, the K–12 faith-based education sector lost nearly 1,200 schools and nearly 425,000 students. This trend has not reversed itself and schools continue to close due to declining enrollment.

But a decline in the number of students is only half the picture. The equation has two variables. To pose the problem differently, schools need to do one of two things to remain viable. Either 1) increase enrollment or 2) decrease staff. This second option is rarely proposed because it forces us out of the one grade/one teacher box. Today there are many educational institutions that choose a multi-age approach for philosophical and educational reasons as opposed to being forced into it due to declining enrollment. Presently there are 10 or more *public* one room school houses in Michigan.

Although Northern Michigan has not been immune to the trend of declining enrollment in both public and parochial schools, the Diocese of Gaylord has not moved to close a school in the past 10 years. As long as student-to-teacher ratios are kept to reasonable levels and the parish support is kept within diocesan guidelines, the school configuration could revert back to a one room school house provided there is support for the concept. This would mean that we could successfully operate a school, fiscally and academically, with as few as 15-20 students. However, this would not be the one room school house of 100 years ago. With the right teacher and support, instruction would be high tech, individualized and collaborative with the home.

Currently seven out of our 17 schools (over 20 classrooms in all) have split or multi-age configurations and they are producing excellent results. All of our schools have had these configurations at some point in their history and many began in one room with a handful of children. I continue to be inspired by the humble beginnings of those first communities. **The Church was in good hands when it was “on loan” to Bishop Baraga from this present generation. How can we today not afford to labor with as much perseverance and conviction on behalf of those who are yet to come?**

Our diocese has been blessed with many holy men and women who now stand at the threshold of a new school year ready to serve our Lord and embrace the challenge identified by Pope John Paul II “to restore to our culture the conviction that human beings can grasp the truth, can know their duties to God, to themselves and their neighbors.”

It is with great hope and optimism that we begin this new school year. As regards our schools here, they are now in good condition.

May God grant us the wisdom and grace equal to the task before us.

[† Unum est necessarium †]

Bishop Baraga, Pray for Us!

Charles Taylor, Superintendent, Office of Catholic Schools