

## THE END OF AN ERA - BUT WITH GRATITUDE FOR MANY BLESSINGS

By now I suspect you will have heard that Cardinal Cupich has announced that our parish school, along with at least one other Archdiocesan school, will close at the end of this school year. For over ninety years, St. Joseph School has provided a superb education for tens of thousands of young people who have gone on to achieve great things in their lives. For those nine decades, the dedicated faculty members—lay and religious—have inculcated Catholic Christian values in the young people of Homewood and surrounding communities, preparing them to make good choices in life and inspiring them to live their faith each day. For all of that, we should be forever grateful.

But, as the familiar saying reminds us, change is the only constant in life. The demographics of our community and of those surrounding us have changed over the past decade, with the presence of fewer young families, fewer large families, and significantly fewer Catholics; and even the excellent Homewood public school system has been affected by those first two developments. That same dynamic touched St. Bernadette's in Evergreen Park (my first parish back in 1977), resulting in the closure of their school a few years ago. With the drastic decline in religious vocations through the years, the cost of Catholic education has risen dramatically, due primarily to the need to provide dedicated lay teachers with fair salaries—albeit far less than they could make in a public school. Those rising costs make it nearly impossible to maintain a Catholic school with fewer than the 235 to 250 students the Archdiocese identifies as the baseline for a viable parish school. Our enrollment has declined steadily over the past four years, with only 64 students currently enrolled, requiring the combining of grades and a significant increase in tuition. And with eighth grade being our largest class with thirteen students, the Archdiocese estimated that we would be very lucky to reach 50 for enrollment next year—clearly an impossible situation to maintain.

In the past year, Mr. Fleming and the School Board worked incredibly hard to reach out to local religious education programs in the surrounding parishes that no longer have schools while also passing out flyers at Metra stations, day care centers and businesses throughout the area, all with little success. When tuition was raised significantly for this school year, current families were offered tuition assistance from our own funds as well as Caritas Scholarships from the Archdiocese, but even that wasn't enough to bring enrollment to a viable level. Over the past five years, the parish has covered the school debt to the tune of over \$1,000,000, depleting church savings to a critical level. And while the parish has had great success with the *To Teach Who Christ Is* fundraising campaign, it's extremely important to understand that the money raised there is for *capital* needs and can't be used for ordinary *operating* expenses. We did, in fact, use over \$50,000 of those funds to replace the school boilers during the summer to ensure that our students would stay warm during these cold winter months, and we had planned to use more of those funds to upgrade the washrooms next summer.

Two years ago, when I was trying to decide on a parish for my final pastorate, the most important deciding factor was the presence of a school, because I have never been in a parish without a school and couldn't imagine parish life without one. One of the reasons the Priests' Placement Board wanted me to come here was because they knew of my dedication to Catholic education and my success in helping to keep St. Bride open when I was pastor there. In addition, the enthusiasm of Mr. Fleming and parish leaders gave me hope that things could be turned around. But as I have said many times in the past year, I can't create children or command parents, as God did in the beginning, to "be fruitful and multiply." And if the parish were to continue subsidizing the school to the tune of over \$350,000 annually, the parish would go into debt within a year and risk closure or merger in the *Renew My Church* process taking place over the next three years – and that is certainly not an acceptable option.

It's important to note that the possibility of closure was shared with parents in a meeting last spring, and the likelihood of this final decision was discussed over the past weeks with parish leaders, including school parents, the Pastoral Staff, the Finance Council and the Winter Picnic Committee, in consultation with representatives from the Office of Catholic Schools and Vicariate VI. The only way we could have avoided closure would have been to raise \$350,000 in **cash** by January 31<sup>st</sup> to cover the likely deficit for 2017-18, **plus** acquire at least \$1,000,000 in pledges to fund the school through 2021. All those who were part of this discussion agreed, albeit reluctantly and sadly, that there was simply no way we could meet that expectation.

Over the next weeks and months, a team from the Office of Catholic Schools will continue to provide sensitive and professional support to our school community. They will work with our teachers to help them find positions in other Archdiocesan schools; they will personally assist every single school family in finding a new school that meets the needs of their children; and they will work with the parish to help us plan ways to celebrate all that St. Joseph's School has meant to generations of families as we close this chapter in the life of the parish. In addition, we will use the remaining money in our tuition assistance fund to provide scholarships to current school families who remain with us through the school year and choose to enroll in another Archdiocesan school for 2017-18. Of course, our school building will continue to be used for our CCD Program on Sundays, athletic programs in the gym and for other parish events. And it will still be here should the demographics of Homewood and surrounding communities change somewhere down the road.

This coming Tuesday, January 17, representatives from the Archdiocesan Office of Catholic Schools will meet with interested parishioners and school parents at 7:00p.m. in the church to answer any questions you might have. But as we move forward with this difficult and painful process, please pray that the Spirit's gifts of understanding and wisdom will guide us, and that our faith will remain firm.

Fr. Bob