

**AND THESE SIGNS
WILL ACCOMPANY
THOSE WHO BELIEVE
(1/3)**

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On April 7, 1988, the feast of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the patron of teachers, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education published *The Religious Dimension of Education in A Catholic School: Guidelines for Renewal*. The document begins with a quotation from the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum Educationis*). (1965), and is a fitting beginning for this discussion of Catholic education as the direct result and gift of one's faith and the distinguishing characteristics of a Catholic education:

The Catholic school pursues cultural goals and the natural development of youth to the same degree as any other school. What makes the Catholic school distinctive is its attempt to generate a community climate in the school that is permeated by the gospel spirit of freedom and love. It tries to guide the adolescents in such a way that personality development goes hand in hand with the development of the "new creature" that each one has become through Baptism. It tries to relate all of human culture to the good news of salvation so that the light of faith will illumine everything that the students will gradually come to learn about the world, about life, and about the human person. (1)

Some twenty-five years later, from his vantage point as a life-long teacher of theology and English in a Jesuit preparatory school in Bronx, New York, the Reverend **William J. O'Malley, S.J.**, captures the reality of what he finds before him each day in a Catholic school in a recent article, "**Converting the Baptized.**" (*America*, September 30, 1989):

If our students lack humility before the truth; if they don't know how to think clearly; if they don't care about one another; there's little hope they'll ever comprehend the Gospel.... Before we can make them even comprehend what Christianity asks, we have to humanize them. What makes humans different from animals -- or from savages -- is that we can know and love. If we make them curious, humble, able to think honestly, loving, confident, then Christianity has a chance.... (2)

Throughout his article, O'Malley insists that any lived, viable, evolving philosophy of education in today's Catholic secondary schools is rooted in and takes its meaning from the Gospel. The incarnation has given a new and accessible meaning of what it means to be a human being in the person of Jesus Christ whom we meet in the Gospels. At the same time, the Incarnation shows believing and committed edu-

cators how they are able to form and shape the image of God which they find in varying degrees of development in their students.

The Catholic educator is one who is called by Christ to proclaim the Gospel. The educator may be Catholic, may feel or know that he/she has been called by Christ, and may even have a deep commitment to the Gospel; but in the ordinary, daily life of a school, proclaiming the Gospel is often the demanding and painful reality of preparing lesson plans, grading assignments, managing what seems entirely unmanageable, bandaging scraped knees, and mending bruised egos. Proclaiming the Gospel for many educators hardly reflects the miracles which the educator expected to perform.

At the end of Saint Mark's Gospel, as Jesus is about to ascend to the Father, there is a striking scene -- a scene which is typical, if not indigenous to the faculty lounge after the last bell on a Friday afternoon. After all he had shared with his disciples -- after all they had witnessed, after all the good works and miracles they themselves had performed in his name, and even after the extraordinary miracle of his resurrection -- Jesus "appeared to the eleven as they sat at table," (3) and found them clearly disheartened, unbelieving and despondent. The zealous ones who would carry on the mission -- the **only** ones who could carry on the mission -- had not only lost sight of and faith in the enterprise, but they had lost heart.

Unlike the administrator who reminds teachers to return parents' telephone calls, fulfill perfecting assignments, and submit grade reports on time, Jesus is conspicuously unconcerned with the practical details of how the mission will unfold. What does concern him is that the disciples have lost heart: *...and he upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.* (4)

Jesus is not afraid to "upbraid them" -- to remind, challenge, and refocus their "unbelief and hardness of heart: to the work and future at hand: *And he said to them: Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.* (5)

It is important to understand that it is the "signs (which) will accompany those who believe." Thus, belief precedes the "signs" or results and "signs" or results accompany belief. There will be no meaningful, enduring "signs" or results without belief. The disciples had lost faith and heart and hence could neither see nor give any signs. With Jesus killed, they thought that there would be no more signs. In this post-resurrection appearance, Jesus is teaching them that one begins with belief, that grace builds on nature, and that the "signs" or results will follow and not precede such faith. Jesus also makes it clear that the signs which accompany faith, (exorcising demons, speaking in tongues, handling serpents, drinking poison), are extraordinary and unable to be manipulated.

It seems that many Catholic schools today have already determined the "signs" or results they wish to produce. Some of these signs include the inordinate importance placed

upon test scores, the percentage of graduates attending four-year colleges, the design of a school's entire curriculum to meet certain colleges' entrance requirements, and the awards and citations which schools and administrators court and receive from the public sector. Many schools measure who they are in terms of what "signs" or results are produced. There are, too, the all-important and carefully-crafted doggerels - academic excellence" and "institutional viability" - which become administrative "fight songs" at faculty meetings and in-service days. They even become, at times, the publicized "themes" of faculty retreats. Is it no wonder that administrators are puzzled by why the "new disciples" are sitting around the coffee table in the faculty lounge on a Friday afternoon hardening their hearts?

O'Malley's article is about students and how the Catholic school must "convert* them. But before we can convert these baptized, however, we must convert the "converters" -- the faculties and administrators who are the same disciples whom Jesus confronted (converted) on the night of his ascension. We must upbraid the hard-hearted and remind them that they are already baptized and that they already believe! We are a long way from Saint James when he writes that "faith apart from works is dead" (6), because many faculty members are still sitting around the table wondering what has happened and what happens next. True faith will always produce works or it is no faith at all; but the good works -- which Catholic schools have traditionally produced -without faith are sorry and empty works.

A brief look at the "Parable of the Sower" in Saint Matthew's Gospel shows us what happens to the seed which falls on the edge of the path, the patches of rock, among the thorns, and on rich soil. (7)

In "Contemplation to Attain the Love of God" in his *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius writes that "Love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words." (8) And even though Catholic educators find themselves producing and manifesting good works, their faith, their heart, and their love are missing, or at best tenuous.

Catholic educators must be reminded that the first call is to belief and that the second call is to incarnate or translate that belief into works. The one who believes and who shares that belief in communion and association with others, will be the one who is prepared for the demons, the new languages, the serpents, and the poisons.

Brother Luke Salm, F.S.C., in his "What Does a Lasallian Educator Do?" (a Keynote Address to a group of Lasallian educators), states that: *He (Saint John Baptist de La Salle) wanted his Lasallian educators to find God, that is, ultimate meaning and value, in the street urchins they faced every day in the classroom, in their colleagues, in their personal and professional failures as well as their successes In the Lasallian sense, then, the spirit of faith has to do with the perception of value, ultimate value. (9)*

(1) Second Vatican Council. "Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum Educationis*)," in Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. (Northpoint, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), #8.

(2) William J. O'Malley, S.J., "Converting the Baptized," *America*, vol. 161, no. 8. (September 30, 1989), p 181; 184.

(3) Mark 16:14a.

(4) Mark 16:14b.

(5) Mark 16:15-18

(6) James 2:26

(7) Cf. Matthew 13:3-9: "And he told them many things in parables saying: 'A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched: and since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on rich soil and brought forth grain: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.'"

(8) Louis J. Puhl, S.J., ed. *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951). #23.

(9) Brother Luke Salm, F.S.C., "What Does a Lasallian Educator Do?" Keynote Address, Christian Brothers Retreat House, St. Helena, California, (February 12, 1988, p. 5.)