

To the Editor:

“What were they thinking?” Judging from the public response of some members of the local community to our discussions about the future of Catholic education in the Saint Cloud metro area, that question is on the minds of many. Various motives and attitudes have been ascribed to the pastors who began this process in the St. Cloud area parishes. The purpose of this letter is to offer that explanation of what we were thinking.

Far from being indifferent to, or even opposed to, Catholic schools, our goal is to see them continue and indeed grow. Otherwise, we could have been content to let them dwindle and fade away, one by one. Since the 1970s, discussions have been underway (here as in many parts of the country) to keep our schools alive. Consider, for example, the incorporation of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton School by Holy Spirit and Saint Anthony’s parishes; the formation of Saints Peter and Paul (later Saints Peter, Paul, and Michael) as a collaboration of those parishes; the collaborative school effort between Saint Mary’s Cathedral and Saint Augustine’s parishes. These were difficult but creative decisions that were made with courage and vision to ensure the future of Catholic schools in our area.

In 2001, discussions began towards the creation of a single Catholic school system (“Catholic Community Schools”). In 2004, administrators, lay representatives from the parishes, pastors, and others began meeting faithfully to craft a way to make Catholic schools more available, affordable, and effective in maintaining and growing the tradition of excellence in education as well as in human formation and experience of Catholic faith. Practical difficulties arose and the process stalled.

Our most recent efforts to address the future of Catholic education were prompted by some of the same four considerations that were part of CCS, along with new concerns:

- 1) changing demographics, leading to declining enrollments. Schools which forty years ago housed 600+ students are now a quarter that size or less. Parishes once baptizing close to 200 children a year now rarely reach 30 baptisms. Population concentrations are moving, and fewer families are choosing Catholic schools.
- 2) financial realities. Data compiled by TeamWorks shows fewer Catholic households and a relatively flat giving curve. Subsidies for Catholic schools have risen from perhaps 20-25% of parish income to anywhere from 35% to 65% or more of total income, or even more depending on how building and salary costs are addressed. As enrollments decline, tuition, fundraising efforts, and cost per pupil increase. While still a relative bargain (especially in light of consistently excellent quality outcomes), Catholic education is increasingly unaffordable for many; parishes sometimes need to borrow to meet subsidy requirements.
- 3) the desire to make more efficient use of resources of personnel, buildings, and other assets. Our ancestors invested their resources in providing the infrastructure that has served the community for many years. In a changing situation, we wanted to explore ways to adjust how we use these resources to address an even broader Catholic formation for all ages.
- 4) the desire to improve programs, through collaboration, in the many areas that are our responsibility to provide as a Church. Catholic schools are a great asset with a rich heritage. Yet parishes flourish with a range of services to meet the needs of the whole spectrum of Catholic life. These include: faith formation and religious education for children of families who do not choose Catholic schools and for our youth; more effective witness to Catholic social teachings through reflective service learning experiences; adult faith formation; outreach to new parents and early childhood education; and better support for Catholics in the Saint Cloud area who are English language learners. Not everyone can be involved in all of these

areas, of course. But these are all part of our concern as pastors, along with the range of other pastoral needs of the people entrusted to our care.

At the heart of all these efforts is evangelization – to announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all the circumstances and stages of our life of discipleship and to work together for the sake of this Gospel, as Jesus teaches us. The faith is very much alive in our parishes and communities. We want to coordinate and build on this potential rather than allowing divided energies and lethargy to slowly sap our strength.

We also value the dedication, sacrifice, and competence of our Catholic school teachers. Some of us have ourselves taught in Catholic schools; many of us have been students in those schools; and all of us have witnessed the fruits of the patient, faithful ministry of our teachers, support staffs, administrators, and volunteers who are there because they too believe in what we are doing. We are not trying to eliminate jobs and programs; we are trying to save them.

The problems we face, highlighted in the four considerations outlined above, are complex and interconnected. Pulling any one thread in this tapestry necessarily affects others. The process of creating various possibilities and options to propose to the members of our parishes was of necessity slow, gradual, and with mutual dialogue. We encouraged the 75 members of the “Options Group” to be creative and visionary. Because we wanted to facilitate the most imaginative thinking possible in this large group, we asked that the developing options – and they changed regularly as discussion took place – not be shared outside of the Options Group. This was not to be secretive or control the outcomes, but to allow open and honest discussion by all.

As pastors, we are charged with leadership, but these are shared challenges for all of us in the Catholic community. We can only work with the resources, energy, and financial stewardship brought forward by the people of our parishes. And we know that these gifts are magnificent: as pastors, we are also privileged and inspired by the faith, generosity, and commitment of so many people. We repeat: the faith is alive and has enormous potential for the good of our community. This potential is realized when we work together without the desire to protect more narrow interests or retreat into suspicion of others, but rather “profess the truth in love and grow to the full maturity of Christ the head” (Ephesians 4:15).

In accord with Bishop Kinney’s directive, we will continue to work together with one another and with you to craft a blueprint for the future of our schools and faith formation programs for all ages. We are grateful to those who continue to support and will collaborate in our efforts to assure that the Gospel is proclaimed in our area, now and for the generations to come.

May Christ’s prayer be fulfilled for us: “that all may be one, that the world may know that the Father has sent me” (see John 17:21).

That’s what we were thinking.

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Father Bob Rolfes
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