

THIRD SUNDAY [A]

Isaiah 8:23-9:3; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17; Matthew 4:12-23

I grew up in Catholic culture so thoroughly Catholic that some might call it a *ghetto*. For sure, there were Catholic neighborhoods like mine all over - including here in Sandusky. And at the same time it sure feels as though there was something *distinctive* about Appleton, Wisconsin, in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

Saint Bernadette school and church was at the end of my city block. Quite literally, Saint Bernadette was the center of the neighborhood. We kids never thought of Saint Bernadette as the *Catholic* school, only as *the* elementary school, where we all wanted to go to school. Johnson Elementary was a few blocks away, yet it may as well have had a North Dakota mailing address.

You see, to us kids – and was an era where neighborhoods still were teeming with kids – there were only two kinds of people: Catholics *and* non-Catholics. On my block - *Fidelis* Street (Latin for “faith”) – everyone knew the one house where the non-Catholic family lived. Mind you, this had nothing to do with prejudice, just recognition of the fact.

And *Fidelis* Street – well, would you believe - it ran into *Lourdes* Drive, where ever so appropriately the school and church were located. I do not recall any appearances of the Blessed Virgin being reported, although I will admit that ample time was given for me to spend time with Sr. Mary in her principal's office.

Saint Bernadette stood atop the neighborhood like a supernatural sentry promising safety and ensuring protection.

And whenever someone asked where we were from in the city, we didn't say the southeast side (a description I only learned later as an adult). Instead we said, “We're from Saint Bernadette.” It never seemed strange to identify ourselves *first* by our spiritual home rather than by geography.

Some folks might consider this “tribal” and I suppose there were certain tribal-like elements – not unlike here in Sandusky where the

local history celebrates tribes who were *ethnic* in origin - German Catholics and Irish Catholics and Italian Catholics and, in more recent ages, Hispanic Catholics. Our local history is marked by truly remarkable people through the ages who similarly saw themselves *first* as Catholic Christians, as disciples of Jesus.

Growing up, we, too, were proud of our Catholic identity. We wanted people to know we were Catholic, even if we did not comprehend the reasons behind our being different (and we did not).

At our Catholic school, uniforms reinforced a sense of belonging to something *distinctive* all the while they saved our parents a lot of clothes money and prevented arguments over fashion fads. Our Catholic school events made for further marks of *distinction*. Holy Days like All Saints and Immaculate Conception always brought forth memorable celebrations. First Communion, First Confession and Confirmation truly were major landmarks in school – not just Sacraments received a church. We learned the prayers at school and, rest assured, we prayed them – the Rosary, Benediction, Stations of the Cross, Blessing of Throats, May Crowning, quiet times in church, Confession each month and Mass every week.

Sadly it was during this era that Christian terminology was deemed as a threat to the Republic in certain public sectors. The US Supreme Court declared that the Holy Name of Jesus was no longer allowed to be spoken aloud in public schools.

When I was at Saint Bernadette, everybody still had “Christmas vacation” (of course, this is no longer true). We had “Easter vacation” while the kids attending the local government school had “spring break”.

The ideas and customs and rhythms of Saint Bernadette school prepared me well to engage the ideas and customs and life experiences of the world at large – all without losing touch with my roots. You see, without roots there is no growth, only dryness and decay.

Whether we knew it or not (and most of us in the neighborhood on Fidelis Street had no idea until much later in life), this “Catholic

difference” wasn’t only a matter of how we described ourselves, how we talked, what we wore and ate and did at school.

The real “Catholic difference” was the astonishing fruit of our education that still bursts forth splendidly now.

- What Catholic education provides is a way of seeing the world *as it truly is, God’s creation.*
- What Catholic education offers is a way of seeing ourselves *as we truly are, made in the likeness and image of God* (cf. Gen 1:26).

Later in life I attended two public high schools and the culture to some degree was foreign. To this day, I lost something during my high school years that I will never be able to regain. There is an impoverishment that remains mine

- from having been not allowed to pray during school;
- from having been not allowed to learn about God from devout adults;
- from having been prohibited from receiving timely and substantial spiritual counsel during school;
- from having been prohibited from gathering with peers while at school so to entrust one another to God’s mercy;
- from having been unable to be inspired explicitly by Christian virtues during school.

The Light illuminating the Catholic school is more than what can be generated by human effort however noble and valiant.

The Light of Catholic education is the Light of the World, Jesus Christ the Lord.

Imperfect, yes! Then, again, everything this side of heaven is imperfect. Imperfect *and* distinctive. The distinctive quality of Catholic education resides with the faculty and staff who openly and unapologetically entrust the children and their families to Almighty God with hopes and prayers throughout every school day that they grow in perfection by means of God’s grace.