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Catholic Parish-Based Religious Instruction: Bearing the Burden

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"In a story produced by local Rochester, New York media outlet WHAM television and WHAM-am radio, recent figures illustrate that enrollment in Catholic schools in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester is declining. An integral part of Catholic education—faith formation—is now largely provided by parish based religious education and faith formation programs. The religious instruction that children received in the school classroom is now being provided by a largely volunteer force in individual parish programs. The question remains: can these parish based programs bear the burden?"

Alumni Corner



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Jodi & Jonathan and a 'holy' trinity

June 2, 2007

Catholic Parish-Based Religious Instruction: Bearing the Burden

by

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In a story produced by local Rochester, New York media outlet WHAM television and WHAM-am radio, recent figures illustrate that enrollment in Catholic schools in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester is declining. An integral part of Catholic education—faith formation—is now largely provided by parish based religious education and faith formation programs. The religious instruction that children received in the school classroom is now being provided by a largely volunteer force in individual parish programs. The question remains: can these parish based programs bear the burden?

The answer to this dilemma is a simple and plain yes. In fact, parish-based religious instruction may be superior to religious education in the Catholic school classroom. There are several reasons for this conclusion. First, parish based programs are for the most part supervised by a trained professional in the field of youth religious instruction. These parish employees are frequently graduate-educated in the fields of theology or ministry and are very well suited and equipped to provide parish families with the knowledge, pastoral care, and resources readily needed to develop the faith within the hearts of our young people. Secondly, those who volunteer their time and talent as Faith Formation Catechists are trained specifically to instruct in the matters of the faith—they are not trained math or science teachers spending some time each day covering the required religious materials dictated by the curriculum of the Catholic

school system. These volunteers are offered training in their home parishes, regionally, and Diocesan-wide to develop their skills as teachers whose primary goal is to instruct the children in their faith-journey.

The downside to this increase in parish based program enrollment is that frequently, those called to serve within this ministry are subject to “burn-out” and “volunteer bankruptcy.” Professional faith formation ministers—who may oversee a program that enrolls 500-plus children in religious instruction and may also be responsible for other parish ministries such as sacramental preparation and mandated child protection and safety programs—frequently spend many evenings, weekends, and extra hours in the office to get the job done. The majority of these professionals—with advanced graduate degrees—are compensated to a lower degree than those in the private sector with comparable positions. In a recent faith formation employees’ salary survey commissioned in April, 2000 by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops it was reported that the national average base salary for full-time faith formation ministers is \$21,200 annually, while in a similar survey (June, 2005) the National Association of Elementary School Principals lists the national average salary for an elementary school assistant principal—a position comparable in terms of training, education, and time commitment to that of a faith formation minister—as \$63,140 annually. Of course, no one who chooses ministry does so for financial reward, but there is a case to compensate these ministers adequately and appropriately for the time and effort they put into their chosen career path. Many of these ministers have chosen this work as their career and thus they have the associated cost of living that comes with being residents of the community in which they work. If parishes are to respond and meet the increased faith-formation needs of the faithful, the quality standard of those who provide those ministries must also increase on a commensurate level.

Additionally, the increase in parish based programs is leading to volunteer “bankruptcy.” There is a larger and ever-growing demand for volunteer assistance in carrying out the mission of faith formation and therefore a need for “more and more bodies.” Frequently these parish based programs require such high amount of volunteers to accommodate the amount of participants and to meet required student-adult ratios. In the Diocese of Rochester the ratio is a 6:1—six children per one adult leader. Faith Formation ministers are forced to spend large amounts of time recruiting volunteers—volunteers who often are involved in other ministries—and attempting to equip them with the skills needed to offer quality faith education. What results is a “bankruptcy” of resources where under-trained and over-extended volunteers are given a trial by fire in a ministry which should be looked upon as a blessing and an opportunity, but rather is looked upon as a chore or problem obligation.

In any case, these parish faith formation ministers will continue to meet the needs of the children with open minds, open hearts, and open arms. Never before has there been such quality and depth of religious instruction in parishes. These ministers are embracing new technologies, new concepts, and new models for forming the faithful Catholic and will—regardless of salary or time commitment—continue to “speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our Glory.” (1 Cor 2:7)