

Fr. Curtis Miller

January 25-26, 2020

Homily for the 3rd Sun. in O.T.

This weekend, we commemorate the Conversion St. Paul, the patronal feast day of our church in Barton. Saul was a devout Jew, who saw Christians as heretics following a false messiah and so he was rounding them up for arrest when he was struck by a blinding light and heard the voice of Jesus say to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” That encounter with the risen Christ transformed his life so radically that he was given a new name, Paul, and he became one of the most tireless apostles of the faith he had once persecuted.

In today’s Gospel reading, we heard the story of Jesus calling His first apostles, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. At the moment they heard Jesus’ voice calling them to follow Him, they left their nets and lives behind. They, too, would spend their lives spreading the Gospel of Jesus, the message that the Son of God has become man, died, and risen again to save us from sin and death. That is indeed good news! The apostles labored to proclaim this Gospel to all the world, undeterred by persecutions, imprisonment, and even death. How? Because when we encounter Jesus, we can’t help but want to share Him with the whole world.

And this story didn’t end with the apostles. Down through the ages, the Church has strived to continue to teach the Gospel of Jesus to all the world, even to today and in this very parish. One of the ways that the Church has spread Jesus’ Gospel is through Catholic schools. This week, we observe Catholic Schools Week, and celebrate the blessing that Catholic education has been in our lives. We are particularly blessed in this parish to have St. Paul’s School.

Just to show the impact of Catholic education, I’ll ask you to humor me by standing up now if you are:

- 1). a current St. Paul’s student
- 2). an alumni, current or former teacher or staff member
- 3). or if you are one of these for any other Catholic school.

Look at the impact that Catholic schools have had! Thank you. You may be seated. (I hope that stretch helps you stay awake for the rest of the homily.)

Why does the Church have schools anyway? Because we follow Jesus’ example of proclaiming the Gospel to the whole person: soul, body, and mind, met through our establishment of churches, hospitals, and schools (among other institutions). We might understand why our schools teach about our faith, but what about the other subjects, like science, writing, and music? Because God is the Author of all that is good, true, and beautiful. Whenever we teach a student about anything that is good, true, or beautiful, they come to know and love God better.

This is not to say that homeschooling or public schools are bad. I went to public schools and I turned out alright (I hope). But there is something special about Catholic schools that is worth celebrating. There we promote academic

excellence, but also character, values, and faith. And we only have our Catholic schools because of the hard work and sacrifices of those who came before us.

When St. Paul's Parish was officially established in 1893, Father Joseph Turcot came to serve as the first pastor. The current church hadn't been built yet, so the Catholics still used an old Congregational church for Mass (hence the name: Conversion of St. Paul). One of Fr. Turcot's first priorities was to establish a parish school, which he did in 1896. They first met in a home on May Pond Road, and later in an old store building that was transported to the property (where the Barton parking lot is now). Mrs. Alphonsine Blais Cote taught French and Miss Kate Flynn taught English.

Ten years later, in 1906, Father Leblanc arrived as the second pastor, a big, strong man over six feet tall, who came to Barton after laboring and ministering among the loggers up in Norton. He put that brawn to work here, recruiting four Sisters of the Assumption from Quebec in 1907 to teach the students. For the next eight decades, these dedicated sisters and their successors looked out upon classrooms of students, from beneath big white oval wimples and black veils.

Times were hard. As factories closed over the years, or burned down, families moved away in search of work elsewhere. Diseases swept the community, the worst being the Spanish influenza in 1919, which claimed the life of teacher Sister St. Rene. Enrollment dropped from 100 to 55.

Still they persisted. Enrollment increased so much by the late 1950s that a new school needed to be built. Thanks to a lot of hard work, generosity, and many sacrifices by our parishioners, the new (current) school building was opened in 1960 to nearly 200 students.

Much changed over the years. Computers were introduced, and the curriculum has been updated periodically. A hard day came in 1991, when the final two sisters announced that they could no longer serve as teachers. By the time of the centennial celebrations in 1996, it looked like we could no longer go on with higher costs and lower enrollment. But our Vermont stubbornness and our commitment to providing faith-based education to our children wouldn't let us quit. Many of you pitched in: serving, volunteering, donating, and praying. St. Paul's School has had other ups and downs in the quarter century since then, but we're still here thanks to you. With your help, we intend to continue this story into the future, forming our young people into disciples who will make a positive impact on our community and who will continue to spread the Gospel of Jesus to all the world.