

Landry: Catholic schools help students shine, one light at a time

It would not be overstating things to say that I owe a lot to Catholic education.

Growing up, I was particularly privileged to journey through Greater St. Albert Catholic schools for 13 years. It's a credit to these schools that my faith was awakened during my junior high years. Our religion classes required a minimum commitment of community service hours, and as a result I had continued to altar serve long after many of my peers had stopped going to Church.

I was serving on a Saturday night in the winter of 1995, when our new parish youth minister came to introduce herself during all our parish Masses. That encounter – and my subsequent involvement in that youth ministry – was the catalyst God used to stir my faith, setting my life on the course I have followed for the last 24 years.

In the 10 years I worked as a parish youth minister, the schools were an essential part of any of the good I was able to do. While for a variety of reasons, many of our young people don't walk through the doors of our churches, most of them can be found in one of these schools. The close relationship between the parish and schools in both St. Albert and Spruce Grove afforded the opportunity to encounter many young people I might not otherwise have met.

In these last years when I've been directly employed by a Catholic school division, I've worked closely with the tremendous staff of Evergreen Catholic Schools, and seen not only their dedication to the work of education, but also their willingness to go above and beyond in the service of an education that is particularly Catholic.

While I'm certain that every school (public, Catholic, or otherwise) has wonderful staff and students, I've come to see a few specific ways that Catholic schools serve the common good.

Catholic schools offer the opportunity for a number of profoundly important conversations. One of the tasks of religion is to spend time asking life's big questions such as "Who am I?", "Why am I here?", and "What happens when we die?" – questions our young people are wrestling with themselves.

In a Catholic school we encourage these questions, and as a result, students often seek out teachers, clergy, or a support person like myself to help make sense of these questions. Regardless of an individual student's religious belief or practices, these are important conversations that the philosophical and theological history of Catholicism is uniquely positioned to have.

Catholic schools also provide a safe place for vulnerable students. One of the clearest examples – and directives – Christ gave us during His three years of ministry was what is often called his “preferential option for the poor,” an ongoing care and concern for whomever was the most in need.

In my own school division, I serve alongside not only frontline teachers and educational assistants, but also school counsellors, resource officers, social workers, an indigenous education coordinator, and countless other support staff all of whom recognize that it is our privilege and our responsibility to love each young person who enters our school buildings each day.

Furthermore, the presence of a Catholic school in some of our smaller communities alongside a larger public school has seen the development of strong relationships between schools and has provided students the opportunity (when needed) for a fresh start in a new environment.

Whatever one’s past decisions or the labels they have picked up in one building, the opportunity to move to the other has on many occasions been a key reason that certain students have graduated from high school at all.

Finally, Catholic schools are a treasure in the mission of the Church to share Christ with the world. Parents who choose to send their children to a Catholic school do so with the full awareness that faith will permeate their school day.

While this doesn’t result in massive upswings in Church attendance, a priest I know once compared his work to lamplighters of yesteryear – men who would appear at dusk in cities that were light up not by electricity but rather by burning lights.

One light at a time, these lamplighters would travel through their cities bringing light into the darkness. Catholic school graduates who have seen how faith can permeate literature, science, history, the arts, and so on; who have seen the care offered those most in need, and who have had the chance themselves to reflect on life’s big questions – all of these become an individual light in a world that often seems so dark.

– Mike Landry is the chaplain for Evergreen Catholic Schools. He is based in Spruce Grove, Alberta.