

School Days in Ordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

A year ago, children rarely complained when they could not go to school. Now, when so many have gone without the comforting familiarity of school for so long, it is clear that learning, playing and navigating childhood together are cherished goods. Like so many goods, they are most missed when they are absent.

In my early years, I loved school. At summer's end, I anticipated the quest for perfect school supplies and the promise of new shoes, new books, and the smell of fresh paint in classrooms with uncommon enthusiasm. After school, I would often come home and play school with my siblings who, to their credit, humored me and played along. Fortunately for them, I no longer corral them into this since I have been blessed with the opportunity to channel this enthusiasm more productively by spending my life as a teacher.

I remember my Catholic school years as a happy blur of school plays, field trips (Radio City! The Bronx Zoo!), student council elections, student newspapers, class Masses for special occasions, glitter and felt art projects (it *was* the 70's and 80's), a May crowning, Christmas parties, poetry contests, the smell of mimeograph machine ink, birthday parties, prayers over the public address system, volleyball (much volleyball) in gym class, candy sales, library hour, spelling bees, science fairs – and lots of plaid. Certainly, there were also misadventures, dramas, cliques and competition. School is, in all ways good and bad, the prelude to adult life.

As I look back on those days, I appreciate them more. While my memories swirl around the *events* of those years, it is the *people* my heart most cherishes with gratitude.

Thanks ... to the sisters in the religious communities who served my school and so many others. When I was in school, I could already see that your ranks were shrinking in number. Yet, the legacy that you and your elder sisters built was a cherished bequest to Church and country. At a time when women in the United States could not vote, or hold most jobs, or, often, not even own property, you began to build and run a network of schools that, at its peak, educated well over 5 million students in 13,000 schools.

As a group, you built something far beyond what many of the most sophisticated entrepreneurs could ever imagine. As individuals, you gave your lives to serve God by serving us. I know now, looking back, that teaching was the vocation within your

vocation. As the beneficiary of that, I am so grateful that my school was possible – and affordable to my parents – because teaching was your labor of love. Almost forty years after I sat in my first grade class, the sister who taught me to read remembered the details of my very first science fair project -- a sundial made of cardboard, a pencil and a spool of thread. That is the memory of someone for whom a lifetime teaching first graders is not a mere job. To her, it lay at the heart of life itself.

Thanks... to the lay teachers who joined in this labor. I know that your salaries were often lower than those of your peers. Without this sacrifice from both you and your families, so many schools could not have thrived as they did. You brought your enthusiasm, dedication, faithful witness, and love. My heart has ached for you in recent years when too many of your schools have closed and you have had to move on – sometimes more than once – from the places where you had served for decades or where you were just beginning to thrive.

Thanks ... to pastors who supported their parish schools for so long, and who continue to support Catholic education in the new models of our time. I see the many ways in which a school enlivens and enriches the life of a parish and its mission of evangelization. Yet I know that a school also brings with it the woes of bulging budgets and broken boilers, expenses and exasperations, complaints and costs. So, many thanks for the hard work of passing on the legacy of faith and reason to your youngest parishioners in whatever ways you could, then and now.

Thanks... to parents like mine, and so many others, who saved what they could to pay for Catholic school when it was possible. For so many, this took funds that they could have used for good things they chose to forego. I remember each month in elementary school, the family tuition check was brought to school by the oldest sibling. As a middle child, I only had this responsibility for two years. But, even then, I knew that this – along with the hours volunteering in the classroom, tracking down obscure ingredients for science projects and buying the candy I could not sell -- was a gift from my hard working parents.

Thanks ... to donors and benefactors who today quietly pass along that same gift to the children in their families or, with special generosity, to the children of strangers they will never meet. When challenges to Church, country, and world seem so great, the gift of an education in faith, wisdom and hope is truly one that keeps on giving.

The world of Catholic education has changed so much, so quickly. Parish schools have grown scarcer than they were when I was a child, and new models are springing up to pass along an ancient faith in ways ever new. I pray that generations who come after me will have their own happy memories of years in which the wonders of both faith and

knowledge unfold for them. As for me, I am grateful for all who gave me my school days in ordinary times.

In Catholic Schools Week, may God bless all who share in this great enterprise of faith, hope and love!

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