

ROOTS AND REUNIONS: THE VALUE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

“Nobody has better roots than us.” With these eye-catching words, I opened the e-mail inviting me to a reunion for 1977 graduates from several St. Paul Catholic Grade Schools. A St. Mark’s alumnus was credited with the above tagline, and it immediately resonated with me, a proud **Nativity** graduate. Yes, if I have learned anything about St. Paul during my lifetime, it is that this city’s roots run deep and wide. One classmate from Nativity described the reunion with the word “surreal” in that he had not seen some classmates in decades. For me, it was not so much surreal as it was a poignant reminder how God continues to guide me through all the years and that I received a pretty solid formation in the faith. Many find reunions to be awkward, especially as time alters our appearance and we scramble to recall names, sneaking peeks at nametags before introducing ourselves. But I did not find the gathering awkward at all. Perhaps I have significantly more self-confidence than I did in those days, and any sense of competition has long since vanished. Still, we chuckled about the competitive “time tests” in math class as well as our unlikely **Catholic Athletic Association** City Baseball Championship.

Nearly 15 years ago, while filling in at a suburban parish, I delivered a Sunday homily about the importance of never giving up, of facing difficult odds with courage, conviction and faith. I illustrated my point by recalling that my 8th grade baseball team lost twice to St. Mark’s during the regular season and that neither game was even remotely close. But we got “hot” in the playoffs and ended up playing them for the third time in the city championship game. Our pitcher (who flew in from Arizona for the reunion) told us before the game that “we had nothing to lose,” as no one expected us to make it a game. “Just have fun and do not sell yourselves short,” our coach added. And so we did, playing the **best game of the season**, edging the Markers 2-1 for the title. St. Mark’s boasted several players who went on to win a state championship at Cretin High School in 1981, earning scholarships at Division I programs such as the University of Minnesota or Wichita State. While distributing Holy Communion, imagine my surprise when the star player from St. Mark’s more than 25 years before appeared in my line! You can’t make it up! He’s a Delta Airlines executive today and a wonderful man. At the reunion, he quickly recalled that Mass, and I assured him that I had not seen him in the pews while delivering the homily!

I also approached a Holy Spirit alum, explaining to him that arguably my “greatest” individual moment in my storied athletic career (insert sarcastic tone here!) came at his expense. As an 8th grader, this kid was at least 6’ 2” and threw a nasty curve ball. Why our coach even put me in against him, I’ll never know. Nor can I assure you that my eyes were even open when I swung. But I ripped a grounder that scooted under the outstretched glove of the first baseman. I was so surprised that I almost fell prey to the dreaded 9-3 put out. For those unfamiliar, that means that I was so slow that the right fielder (9) nearly threw me out at 1st Base (3)! But **I collected my hit**. By the way, that opposing pitcher also went on to play college baseball as a Minnesota Gopher. We all had a good laugh.

I visited with a number of classmates both from Nativity as well as other nearby schools. Several shared with me their **involvement in their local parishes** and that their kids attend or have attended Catholic schools. I met two women who attended High School at Saint Agnes, and so I shared with them my later connection with that school. For a little over three hours, no one seemed to worry about what kind of car we drove, our waistlines or hair color. We had simply gathered as Saint Paul kids who grew up in neighborhoods in which we all walked (or biked) to school and who could to this day identify one another’s homes. Much of the conversation centered upon inquiring about our respective parents and siblings. I even made a “confession” to one of my classmates, admitting my jealousy following our 8th grade roller-skating party at Saints West. During the special (girl ask guy) trip around the rink, the girl on whom I (and many others!) had a crush selected him, not me. Some wounds never heal!

Memories are powerful, for good or for ill. While time passes, it also heals, and thankfully, for the most part the good memories outlive the bad. We all share much more in common than we might think at first

glance. Life has thrown each of us a curveball or two– that is part of the journey in this “valley of tears.” And yet, God blesses us, he molds and shapes us. As we reviewed the names of our teachers, we marveled at their patience with us through the years. We recalled certain details with laser-like exactitude, while other anecdotes elicited looks of bewilderment as we struggled to remember. But there is no question that deep impressions were made. I hope **all teachers in Catholic schools** know the degree to which they can have a positive influence on a young person’s life. I am indeed **proud of my roots**, and I would not trade them for anything. May the Catholic formation we all received continue to bear fruit in all of our lives.

- A rare copy of a **1493 A.D.** letter written by **Christopher Columbus** has been returned to its rightful owner. An actuary from Atlanta had purchased the document in good faith from a rare book dealer in 2004 for \$875,000! He died in 2014, and only after his death was it determined by U.S. Homeland Security that this was indeed the copy that had been stolen from–are you ready?– the Vatican Library! Columbus’ account of his voyage to the New World describes lands with “large flowing rivers” and “trees of endless varieties.”
- **St. Teresa of Calcutta** (Kolkata) died twenty years ago this coming Tuesday. I would be hard pressed to name a more influential woman of the 20th century than she was. I do not mean merely in the Catholic Church, but worldwide. Her radical love of Jesus in the poor was transformative for the Church and the world.
- When I caught just the tail-end of a story that **ESPN** had reassigned an Asian-American reporter from covering the University of Virginia football game, sending him instead to Pittsburgh, I was confused. Why was he reassigned? Then I found out– the announcer’s name is **Robert Lee**. Are you kidding me? The events in Charlottesville were horrible– I dedicated an entire column to it. If this is not an example of political correctness run amok, what qualifies?
- Each registered Cathedral parishioner receives a packet of stewardship envelopes. In addition to the weekly offering, the packet contains several other envelopes. For example, the **Caritas Fund** comes in a monthly yellow envelope. Through your help, I recently purchased additional gift cards that will assist those in need of food, bus transportation, etc. We also donate to worthy charities out of this fund. Next week, we’ll take a special collection for Hurricane Harvey relief efforts, following the devastation in Houston.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector