

Andrew Greeley

Closing the Catholic schools



THE CLOSING of Providence-St. Mel High School is enough to make anyone ashamed of being a Catholic. In the 30th Chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel we are told that in the final judgment our worth will be reckoned by what we have done to the least of the brothers and the sisters. "I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink . . ."

To the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, the Judge would have to say, "I was hungry for an education and you would not teach me. I was thirsty for college and you turned me away from your doors. I was imprisoned in the ghetto and you closed down my school because it needed repairs."

Of course, not all Catholics in Chicago can be blamed for the closing of the black Providence-St. Mel High School and the mostly Hispanic St. Michael's High School. The decision was made by a handful of men who stubbornly, blindly, intransigently argue that they have no obligation to spend money educating the non-Catholic poor.

IN TOTAL DEFIANCE of the spirit of the second Vatican Council, these men claim they are the church, they are the archdiocese, they are the only ones who matter when it comes to decisions about allotting the vast financial resources of the diocese.

They also, in fact, claim that they are accountable to no one; they can do what they want, and the harm done

to the image and mission of the church, as well as the poor people of Chicago, is subject to no higher review on earth. They seem to be getting away with it.

The offering of alternative education to citizens of the inner city is one of the most impressive works of American Catholicism. In most places, like New York and Cincinnati, it is done generously and unprotestingly. In Chicago more money is spent on inner-city schools than in any other diocese, but it is spent grudgingly.

Schools are closed down on the slightest pretext and always without any meaningful consultation. Cardinal Cody and his vicar general could hardly restrain their display of satisfaction at the closing of Providence-St. Mel and St. Michael's. One more big financial burden on the diocese unloaded. That's what being an up-to-date, modern cardinal archbishop is all about—financial administration.

UNDOUBTEDLY, THE two high schools were a drain on archdiocesan finance. That's what Christianity is all about. They were not nearly so much of a drain as the archdiocesan closed-circuit television network which nobody watches. The choice of an expensive plaything over Providence-St. Mel and St. Michael's is a scandal.

There is every evidence—reinforced by a survey taken last summer by The Chicago Tribune—that the Catholic laity of the diocese are willing to pay for the church's inner-city educa-

tion mission. Indeed, they are willing to contribute far more than the amount of money required to keep the inner-city schools open.

There are annual collections in the archdiocese for a wide variety of purposes. Very few of them are as critically important to the church and to society as inner-city education. If the financial straits of the diocese are as bad as the cardinal and the vicar general suggest [one must wonder how they got that bad], why wasn't the last desperate expedient of an annual collection applied to save the schools?

The answer is because the cardinal and the vicar general don't want to have a collection. In the archdiocese of Chicago these days that's the only answer that really matters.

HUNDREDS OF PRIESTS and nuns have dedicated their lives to inner-city education. Millions of dollars from the pockets of the lay people in the City of Chicago have gone to that mission. Now its impact on the community has been blighted if not destroyed by a stubborn, stupid decision made by men whose ultimate rationale is that they are the only ones who have any power.

Fortunately my religious commitment is not based on the intelligence or virtue of my religious leaders. Still I must hang my head in shame because of what has been done by a few men who have decided that they and they alone are the Catholic Church in Chicago.

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