

North Catholic Celebration of the Marianists in the Pittsburgh area for 150 years

November 8, 2009

About 150 people gathered for this great commemorative celebration at the North Catholic chapel. It was followed by a luncheon. The homily was based on the Gospel of Sunday, Nov. 8, taken from Mark 12:41-44: The widow's offering of all she had ...

Jesus never misses an opportunity for a teaching moment with his disciples. Today we have a splendid example of this which shows his skill as a teacher and a keen observer of people. His disciples are in Jerusalem with him near the temple. He is the only one who observes a poor widow who puts her last farthing or penny into the coffers in front of the temple. St. Mark tells us that Jesus was seated opposite the temple (a position of a teacher in those days). There he observed the crowd putting in their money offerings. He was so moved by what he saw in a poor widow who was giving more than all the others because she gave from a generous heart. She sacrificed all that she had for the praise and glory of God.

Pope Benedict XVI says, "This widow's tiny and insignificant coin becomes an eloquent symbol. She gives God not out of her abundance, not so much what she has, but what she is – her entire self."

All of us present in this chapel at North Catholic have something in common with this poor widow. We realize Jesus is addressing us as his disciples, just as he taught those disciples who were with him on this occasion. Where did he learn how to teach and to be so aware of what was going on around him? Undoubtedly from his Mother Mary, who was his educator and who is our educator in this Catholic and Marianist chapel and school.

Mary pondered over, observed things and then taught Jesus many of the stories which he would create into his parables. She thus helped him to grow in wisdom and knowledge before God and people. We are today's disciples who are involved with education and the formation of faith of the heart in those whom we teach and meet. And on this occasion of 150 years of the Marianists in Pittsburgh— we, both lay and religious, both men and women, both old and young, continue to be the spirit of what has taken place here and elsewhere in Pittsburgh for a century and a half.

We learn from Jesus' observing that poor widow that we are to give totally of ourselves and our talents to the task of Marianist formation and education in knowledge and faith. Each one here today represents that woman. Jesus is aware of who we are and what we do for education in Pittsburgh and elsewhere. Moreover, each one here has had a role in what is happening and has happened at North Catholic.

Like the first two Marianist brothers who were invited to start a grade school at St. Philomena's in 1850, we have the spirit of their foundation in our memories and hearts. We celebrate the beginnings, the continuing, and the future adaptations of how to carry on the legacy of education in the spirit of Mary our Educator and Blessed Chaminade who did so much for education and formation of the faith throughout his life.

We know that more than 10,000 students have been educated on the North Side by the Marianists and their coworkers. We call to mind that each of the schools – like St. Philomena's, St. Michael's, North Catholic and other community endeavors – have given us both lay and vowed Marianists. Many of them are here today and we are among them and they are the continuation of that first foundation.

All of us gathered at this Eucharist – lay Marianists, staff, friends, affiliates, vowed brothers and priests – are keeping the memory of the past alive while creating new things for the future. Even though no religious brother or priest is now present in the school, the lay Marianists and staff and teachers have continued the work of Mary's mission to bring Jesus into the classroom and wherever else they are. As one of the Marianists recruited from Pittsburgh used to say, "And the beat goes on." (Fr. Tony Perfetto, S.M.)

We experience the welcoming Marianist spirit at the entrance to North Catholic High School with its sign of the Marianist characteristics of education and by the beautiful statue of Our Lady of North Catholic. Posters, art, and sayings help us realize this is not an ordinary high school. The inborn friendliness of Pittsburghers carries on without pretension or aggressive competition even though the school has had an abundance of championships both from the men's and the women's teams of North Catholic. Order, cleanliness, and beauty are easily seen in the halls and classrooms. This certainly enhances Marianist and Catholic education.

Since the foundation at St. Philomena, remarkable things have happened: boys were educated, riots in the cities and ethnic troubles were curtailed and churches were built: first St. Patrick, then St. Paul, St. Mary's, and then St. Philomena. The Redemptorists helped bring the Marianists here in 1859. Brother Paul Kraus and Anthony Heitz were the first to come and teach. In the parishes mentioned a saint also graced the city, namely, St. John Neumann who served at St. Philomena's. The results soon came and within the 30 years of our presence in the school, some 15 vocations came.

Among them was Brother John B. Kim, who under the tutelage of Fr. Leo Meyer went to France and Italy. He then studied at Fribourg in Switzerland and became the first great superintendent for the Marianists. Later he was the first vice president of the emerging higher education institution of St. Mary's Institute in Dayton. Bro. Kim would start the role of supervisor of education that would eventually lead him to become the first American who had a position on the General Administration in Rome.

Next came St. Mary's in 1871, this time at the invitation of the Benedictines. The brothers came and offered help for the smallpox epidemic and from the ensuing floods that took place in 1884, 1902 and 1936. A total of 46 Marianists eventually came from this institution of education. One of the vowed religious is still alive and lives in Cupertino, Brother Charles Ehrenfeld who now is in his 97th year! Bro. Charlie matches the Cleveland Indian jacket and sweater of Fr. Lawrence Mann with his Pirate and Steeler paraphernalia. Forty six Marianists came from this illustrious school and again some were great leaders for the Province and for education: Very Rev. Christian Christ, Very Rev. Bro. George Sauer, Bro. Bernard Schad, Bro. Michael Schleik and Very Rev. Lawrence Yeske. Thus superintendents and provincials came from these schools as well as the excellent teaching brothers.

Next came St. Michael's school with a similar story and the recruitment of 48 Marianists during its existence, among them leaders like Very Rev. Joseph Ei, Very Rev. Brother Eugene Paulin, and another great educator recently deceased, Bro. Elmer Dunsky.

This present North Catholic High School is located on the former site of the old St. Joseph's Orphanage which was founded in 1849. It was associated with the German people of Troy Hill. The Redemptorists from St. Philomena were the founders of the asylum for orphans. The number of orphans dwindled and it was time for some new

venture — the beginning of North Catholic High School. Under the leadership of Bishop Hugh Boyle the Marianists were again sought. And in September 1939 the first faculty was formed.

From North Catholic more than 40 Marianists received their call and some of them are here today (Brothers Thomas Oldenski, Bernard Hartman and Fr. Joseph Kozar) and continue to keep the Marianist spirit of Our Lady as Educator alive. In addition some 30 other Marianists from the Pittsburgh area were called to be Marianists because of the influence of the brothers at North Catholic. Bro Bill Grundish and I are among them!

In the summing up of the vowed religious from Pittsburgh, more than 180 are to be counted. This would be larger than most Provinces today.

We are graced and thankful for all who kept the Marianist and Catholic spirit going in this wonderful high school. We realize that Jesus observed all of us present putting all that we had into this spirit for education and service through our devotion to Mary and our spirit of faith.

Finally, the teaching moment of Jesus given to us in today's Gospel was repeated in a happening that I experienced in Rome while studying there. At the end of the Mass one of the widows dressed entirely in black and certainly a poor person came up to me and asked to go to the sacristy. She had saved for a special collection taken up for education by the pope at that time, Paul VI. There she unfolded a large bill of money that was equivalent to about \$25. She brought home the meaning of Jesus' observation and teaching that always makes this Gospel come alive for me each time I read about that woman whom Jesus observed giving her last penny. Amen.