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The Catholic choice

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

Last year around this time, I sat in church for the start of Catholic Schools Week next to my mother and sister. They were visiting L.A. from Florida, where most of my family (being good New Yorkers) moved a few years ago. They were part of a packed church -- always filled during this week with young parents and their four-year old children, investigating our parish school.

Some moms and dads had also looked into nearby top-dollar private academies, and were figuring out which way to lean: prestige and bankruptcy, or moral guidance, tradition, and money left over for a movie every now and then. Most others made an even tougher calculus: Los Angeles public school (with all the accompanying big-city problems), or somehow scraping together the tuition for a Catholic education and the promise of better opportunity.

Not my sister, though. Not as far as I knew. Just like me, she went to Catholic schools through 12th grade -- but was now firmly established in the public realm. She is a school psychologist for a public education system near Tampa, and deals with a long menu of problems kids bring to school with them: angry homes, unemployed fathers, migrant citrus workers who keep their children in class only through harvest and then pull them out, move on.

Her son -- my nephew -- was in fifth grade in an elementary school a few blocks from his home. My sister spent half her week at that school -- it was a good fit. She was, she felt, supporting the system that supported her. But as he faced moving on to middle school, my sister felt something was missing. She couldn't put her finger on it.

During our Catholic Schools week Mass, students and parents from our parish school got up to speak. At the start of the celebration, parishioners carried in candles marking others who had passed on that year,

and donated to our struggling scholarship fund.

Afterwards, my sister, my mother and my family toured the open house -- we looked at my daughters' classrooms and chatted amiably with the teachers and principal. We strolled over to the auditorium and took in the school art fair. Along the way, we stopped three dozen times to visit with other families as our kids ran off with their friends and raced around the parking lot.

My sister took it all in very quietly, I noticed. I assumed she found it all lacking -- not up to the standards of a new public school system in a freshly-built Florida suburbs -- we had no psychologists, our science labs could never be confused with CalTech. But she smiled pleasantly and paid close attention.

Two weeks after she left, my mother called from central Florida. Did I hear the news?, she asked -- Did my sister call? -- No - what? What was wrong?

She had made up her mind, my mother said. She was taking her son out of public school in the Fall and placing in the local Catholic junior high.

I was still frozen in place when my sister called to explain -- it was the warmth, she said. The way everyone, from parents, to teachers, to principal and pastor all cared; the way everyone knew everyone else. It was like family, she said -- like the school she remembered as a little girl.

She had to battle her husband a bit (not a Catholic, subject for another blog -- many years in the future) -- but they came to terms and my nephew is in Catholic school now. He doesn't love the uniform -- but has embraced everything else. He gets A's in all his subjects and has a great set of friends.

He is happy. My sister is happy. She still works for the local public school system and appreciates what it tries to do with all the contradictory roles it is ordered to play. But her son's school, she says, has only one role -- making her boy into a better man.

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