

St. Gertrude's School

by

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It was a pleasant June evening when I entered Tuck's in North Apollo to grab a pepperoni & mushroom pizza. As I opened the door to exit, I looked straight ahead and instantly stopped dead in my tracks. Across the Kiski River, high on a hilltop in Vandergrift, the sun was majestically setting. The striking silhouette of St. Gertrude Catholic Church framed the picture. The sun was symmetrically positioned between the two bell towers of the church. It looked like a postcard. It was an awe-inspiring sight. I took a deep breath and wondered if it was just chance coincidence or if the builders in their wisdom had aligned their church in such a way.

But the setting sun's imagery quickly brought to mind another scene not as cheery. Earlier that week I had been lamenting the closing of St. James School in Apollo. It was a sad occasion in our area. Like many Catholic schools, St. James was not able to survive financially. The school was now just another tragic statistic. Was the sun now setting over the last Catholic school in our area, St. Gertrude School?

June turned into August and St. Gertrude gained a new principal, Bob Fernadley. I introduced myself to both Bob and Fr. Thaddeus that August. I presumed they were committed to the faith but I was heartened to learn they were committed to academic excellence. I offered to help in whatever small way I could and they asked if I knew anything about computers.

Although I have often joked about the strict discipline I endured in Catholic schools, somewhere along the road of life I came to the humble conclusion that people like Sister Mary Agnes of St. James were right. While the moral compass of the world went berserk, those crazy rules, those inane absolutes, those absurd stories, that unwavering orthodoxy drummed into my head in Catholic school at an early age rang truer and truer as time marched forward.

But perhaps most importantly, I discovered that reason without faith was as inadequate to life's riddles as faith without reason. The integration of faith and reason in education benefits the greater community and not just the Catholic parish. In light of this, I thought St. Gertrude School was a valuable community resource worth a little elbow grease.

So for my very small role, Bob invited Tony Hockenberry and me into his school for a review of his computer lab. As we had hoped, the room was large with tables, desks and chairs neatly arranged around the room. There were almost 24 machines uniformly spaced on the tables and desks but I quickly saw that most of these computers were old.

Bob asked Tony to tag all the machines that were worth keeping. I could see what was coming so I asked Bob if he was really committed to academic excellence. Bob shook

his head yes. Tony then told him that he could tag all of the machines but one. They needed a serious computer infusion.

Undeterred, Bob said that he was going to have to do whatever it took. Fr. Thaddeus then entered the room and showed equal resolve. They didn't want their kids to fall behind. To the contrary, they wanted them to get ahead. I liked that. So we rigged the good computer to the Internet before we left and off we went.

In the days that followed, Fr. Thaddeus and Bob worked minor miracles to bring new computers into the school. Volunteers stepped up to the plate to contribute in their small ways also.

But I quickly realized computers were merely a tool, an important tool of the most impressive aspect of St. Gertrude which are the teachers. I forget many things but I can recite the names of all my Catholic grade school teachers. Their dedication to kids like me was immeasurable. Likewise, the commitment of the teachers at St. Gertrude is really something special.

Now as I drive from Oklahoma to Vandergrift I view the church from another direction as I hope to one day catch the sun rising between the bell towers. I just hope the sun keeps rising over St. Gertrude School.



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