

## The Difference a Catholic School Makes in a Neighborhood

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Catholic Schools Week had a bright shining star of Catholic Education in young Amanda Gorman, the poet who spoke at the inauguration. From our earliest American History, the Catholic Church has made a difference in education. Catholic or not, everyone was freely welcomed into our schools: rich, poor, immigrant, slave, and Native American. These children grew up to become leaders, high achievers, adults who made a difference in the world. A Catholic Education can do this.

Sadly, the recent uprising in our Capitol demonstrated the clash between cultures and how it shatters our United States' unity. Rejection and even violence greet many immigrants to our country from those harboring prejudice passed down from one generation to another. The lyrics from Rodgers and Hammerstein's play "South Pacific" speak volumes: "You've got to be carefully taught...before it's too late...to hate all the people your relatives hate; you've got to be carefully taught."

But what if you weren't ever taught to hate? You were taught to smile at everyone, to accept them as your friend. You would love learning, be happy to go to school, and have such respect for your teachers. You must be going to a Catholic school.

For fourteen years, I had the privilege of teaching at St. Pius, the Fifth Catholic School in St. Louis. I worked alongside Sisters Paulette and Dorothy Ann. I taught children from every continent, coming from over twenty countries. The parish advertised our school as "proud to be in a multi-cultural neighborhood." We offered help to anyone, whatever their Faith, and were accepting of their ways of doing things. They taught us to work for the common good and use our talents to make everything more beautiful. Was it easy? No, but we had our own little "United Nations" and proved that people of different religions and cultures could happily get along. We were "catholic" as well as Catholic. One student told me, "You always have good luck because you have Jesus." He was Buddhist. Ha! Ha!

We taught them about God and respected that their family might call Him Buddha or Allah, but we were all one family. We appreciated creation and taught them to know about Jesus, who showed us how to "Love God-love others." We celebrated their holidays, ate their foods, sang their music, and played their games.

As teachers, we used storybooks and media that portrayed cultures around the world. We made learning more fun: building rain forests, week-long study of Egyptian or Native American cultures, enjoying TET, the Vietnamese New Year celebration. Our students had "heroes called saints," not just the European ones, but persons from South America, Africa, Korea, India, and China. Our Masses had "sign language," student accompaniment on many instruments, processions in costumes, and even liturgical dance. We helped them qualify to get into the best Catholic High Schools, and they went on to become doctors, nurses, artists, chefs, movie writers, designers, business owners, and successful moms and dads. They're grown now; many have bi-racial marriages. Most are still best friends. We keep in contact on Facebook. I support Catholic Education as a Bold Action to help all people learn to get along.

### **A few things to think about when talking to immigrants that I learned along the way:**

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- ❖ Someone may be nodding their head and smiling at you, but that doesn't mean they understand you. Try gesturing or show a sign or object to demonstrate what you are communicating.
- ❖ Native Americans do not look at you when talking. They look down; otherwise, it is disrespectful.
- ❖ The Vietnamese do not have pronouns in their language. Always say the name of the person or thing.

- ❖ Asians view the area from the chest to the top of the head as their aura—area of the Soul. Do not stroke hair or put an arm on their shoulders. This action is very personal.
- ❖ If you come to someone's house with shoes outside, remove your shoes too.
- ❖ Older Bosnians are very hard of hearing from the sound of bombs going off in their younger days. This is probably true of Mideasterners because of bombings in their countries.
- ❖ Do not send Vietnamese a thank you note. It is considered insulting. They know you are grateful. Don't repeat the thanks.
- ❖ Asians have a philosophy that a person does their best, so the whole group is happy and/or in harmony with nature.
- ❖ Latinos change their mind very easily. Confirm a meeting with them and/or remind them of it. Otherwise, they'll forget.
- ❖ The Vietnamese find great joy in nature.
- ❖ Asians follow a different calendar. Chinese New Year can occur between the end of January and the middle of February. Chinese New Year is very important. Everyone is a year older (they do not celebrate Birthdays).
- ❖ Prior to Chinese New Year, every single thing and place must be cleaned out. This is very sanitary and avoids clutter.
- ❖ The Chinese New Year begins with fireworks at midnight. For the first three days of Chinese New Year, which Vietnamese call TET, all children receive little red envelopes with money inside. On the second day, everyone is to visit their parents, who give them red envelopes too. Red and gold are the colors of decorations. Everyone gets new clothes so that the old bad spirits won't recognize them.
- ❖ Bosnians like to barter about anything, so, if shopping, be prepared to barter.
- ❖ Asians will study and apply for American citizenship as soon as possible. Europeans usually do too. Latinos and Africans are very slow to want to try.
- ❖ Did you know it costs about \$1000 to apply for citizenship? Applicants have a lot of legal work to do. The test to pass includes one hundred questions and answers to study. It is very difficult, even for a citizen. The applicant must get ten correct answers. The tester may choose any of the hundred questions to use in the examination. Ten out of fifteen questions must be correct. The person must be able to answer questions in correct English orally. Fewer answers are required of Senior Citizens, and, after seventy, persons may take the test in their native language.
- ❖ Africans will not be comfortable sitting on the grass. They fear snakes. They squat.

### **Reflection questions:**

What values fostered at St. Pius are essential values in your own life?

Do you place yourself in situations with persons very different from yourself? How does being in a diverse group of persons affect you?

What were you taught, explicitly or implicitly, in your birth family about other nationalities and races? What is the effect on your attitudes as an adult? What are you passing to the next generation?