

«HIGHER EXPECTATIONS»

IN THE CATHOLIC

INNER CITY HIGH SCHOOL

**Christian hope – shaped by teachers,
school climate and curriculum design—
thwarts the realities
of early death and poverty.**

Antoine's mother thanked the young men and women who had organized everything, who had spoken, who had led the prayers. She repeated what she had said a year before, that Antoine was a good boy. He was not an angel; but he was a good, respectful boy. Every morning he prayed a psalm with his mother before leaving the house, as he did a year ago when he left for school but did not return.

The students who shared their reflections at the memorial service voiced a wide range of feelings: anger, frustration, fear, hope and love. No one expressed surprise.

On his way home from school, near the East New York housing projects in which he lived, a group of older teenagers had without cause beaten Antoine so badly that he died a few days later. Death is always shocking, especially when the victim is young. But murder is so frequently the cause of death for young blacks that it is not a surprise. Most of Antoine's friends knew of other youngsters who had been murdered in their neighborhoods. When you are young and black and male,, murder may be the final fact of life.

Homicide is the leading cause of death for black males between the ages of 15 and 44, and for black females between the ages of 15 and 24. During his lifetime, a black male has one in 21 chance of becoming a homicide victim; he is six times more likely to be murdered than is a white male. When a murder victim is a 16-year-old student in your own school, there is new import to these and like statistics:

- In 1976, when many of today's eighth-graders were born, more than half of all black children and 45% of all Hispanic children born in New York City were born to single mothers.

- In 1985, one out of every two black children under the age of 6 lived below the poverty line; for Hispanic children, the figure was two out of live children.

- In 1985, median income for white families was \$29,152; for black families it was \$16,786; and for Hispanic families it was \$19,027, with poverty rates growing faster for the Hispanic population. (1)

What are the implications of these statistics for the Catholic high school with a large minority population? When students, by virtue alone of being Hispanic or black, are more likely to be murdered than are white students, death is not far from student consciousness. In fact, when ninth-graders in our school are asked at the start of a class retreat to name what they most fear, 30% to 50% name "death." When 11th or 12th-graders sign up for electives, sections fill up most quickly in the course Death and Dying. The Catholic high school offers something that public schools cannot easily allow: open discussion of life and death, of death and dying, with a difficult but clear position grounded in faith. Central in such discussion is the reality of hope: not as a palliative, but as a leavening agent.

A second implication of statistics about death and poverty in minority communities is that "higher expectations" in a Catholic high school must be rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is important to assert this clearly because when the phrase "higher expectations" is used in educational writing, it is often unwittingly rooted in an assembly line view of school popularized earlier this century by the Efficiency Movement. (2) If education means simply choosing the best "raw material" and producing a well-educated "final-product," Catholic schools would have only to assure some final Catholic coating. Students in such schools might implicitly learn that success is a matter of performance and production, reward and consumption—hardly Christian values.

Instead, a Catholic high school community can call all of its members to respond to the challenge of prophets of every age: to see visions and to dream dreams. For a black or Hispanic youngster it may be especially important to have a dream. It is not utopian thinking that a school must sanction, but firm hope and Christian expectation grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The clearest statement of Christian expectation is the Nicene Creed: *exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum et vitam venturi saeculi*—I expect, I am fully confident about, I have as my living hope the resurrection of the dead and life in an age soon to be.

These are the "higher expectations" fundamental to the Christian community and central to a Catholic inner city high school.

Hope is at the heart of such a Catholic high school, and hope can take shape in the lives of students through the teachers, the school climate and the careful design of curriculum.

Where many young people face unrelentingly harsh realities in life, the teacher is a sacramental sign of gentleness and acceptance. Where many young people find few adults concerned enough to guide and correct them, the teacher is a sure and firm guide. Three hundred years ago, the church's patron saint of teachers, John Baptist de La Salle, defined the role of the Christian teacher.

"You who are teachers have the responsibility to use every possible means to bring those under your guidance into that liberty of the children of God which Jesus Christ obtained by dying for us. You must do this by possessing two qualities in your relationship with them. The first is your gentleness and patience. The second is prudence in your reproofs and correction. (3)

The teacher, as sacramental sign, reveals some of life's unsuspected dimensions. A teacher helps a student to believe in him/herself. In inviting a student to believe in the power of life over death, in the possibility of shaping a world in the image of the Lord and the beatitudes, the teacher is a sign of hope.

Not only the teacher but the total school community is to be a sign of hope, somehow reflecting the Mystical Body of Christ. It is a tribute to the honesty of Catholic high school administrators that, in the NCEA's survey of Catholic high schools, two areas of school life given some of the lowest evaluations were: a/ responding to the special needs of minority students (rated fair or poor by 28%) and b/ recruiting and retaining low-income students (rated fair or poor by 40%). (4) Perhaps the lead question on climate questionnaires distributed to black students in Catholic high schools should be: "Does this school receive you as you think Jesus Christ would receive you?" The total school community teaches the basic lessons: This school cares about you, believes in you, supports you. This school challenges you to reshape yourself and society in the image of the risen Lord.

Excellence in course design and curriculum planning is another practical way that a Catholic school builds hope. Courses must challenge students to think clearly, to work hard, to be creative. Courses must offer students a realistic opportunity to succeed. Good curriculum design calls forth from students new belief in themselves, new trust in their ability to learn.

Minority students are often low income students with predictably lower scores on standardized tests than higher income students. Such test scores can debilitate adolescents and cause them to lose hope. In such circumstances, thoughtful curriculum planning and competent, caring teachers are especially important.

Thirty years ago, philosopher Etienne Gilson reminded teachers of the limitations and the importance of their work. Gilson wrote:

"We should not imagine that school children know nothing more than what they are taught in schools. In fact, what we teach them is but an infinitesimal part of their knowledge, but it is made up of what, without us, they would never learn." (5)

What most minority youngster learn about the Catholic faith and Catholic attitudes toward minorities will be learned not only from teachers in Catholic schools, but from Catholics in the local community. Minority youth will surely learn whether Catholic high schools reach out enthusiastically to them or reach out only to those among them with special academic or athletic promise. This said, Gilson's words can encourage and challenge teachers of minority youngsters in Catholic high schools. Without such teachers, students might not learn the "higher expectations" open to them through the power of the resurrection, and their responsibility, as children of God, to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in reshaping the world in the spirit of the beatitudes.

Brother William Harkins

(1) Statistics on murder rates are from **Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Black and Minority Health**, vol 5. **Homicide, Suicide and Unintentional injuries**, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, January 1986, pp. 5-10. For statistics on poverty see **The New York Times**, Sept. 4, 1986 and Sept. 16, 1986. See also Henry M. Levin, "The Educationally Disadvantaged: A National Crisis," **Working Paper No. 6 of Public/Private Ventures: The State Youth Initiative Project**, Philadelphia, 1985, pp. 3-5.

(2) Raymond Callahan, **Education and the Cult of Efficiency**, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962.

(3) John Baptist de La Salle, **Meditations for the Time of Retreat**, Winona, MN, St. Mary's Press, 1975, pp. 82-83.

(4) National Catholic Educational Association, **The Catholic High School: A National Portrait**, Washington, DC, 1985, p. 133.

(5) Etienne Gilson, "The Eminence of Teaching," **A Gilson Reader**, New York, Image Books, 1957, p. 303.