

LAW & THE COURTS

Save Catholic Schools

By KATHRYN JEAN LOPEZ | May 18, 2020 6:30 AM

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(Jonathan Bachman/Reuters)

Their cause is before the Supreme Court. Let them serve. Help them serve.

ERHAPS you listened to the Supreme Court oral arguments in the Catholic-school case on C-SPAN? Even with it happening by phone and our listening in live, it

Pnostalgia, too, for the days when we had First Amendment debates independent of pandemics. And aside from the important religious-liberty questions involved, it's hard to get too far from how different things are and will be. Some of the questions asked during arguments made clear a skepticism that a Catholic-school teacher would ever be more than a mere functionary reading from a textbook. Is that how secular we have become, that Supreme Court justices could not fathom that a religion teacher could ever serve any kind of ministerial elements? To what extent is that the result of Christians behaving badly, leaving the impression we're not truly believers? (Everything these days probably could and often should be a prompt for an examination of conscience.) Religion class is not vocabulary class, and, in fact, a Catholic-school teacher ideally approaches vocab from the heart of the gospel, seeking to make the love of God present in her presence. Which, of course, is even more challenging these days, as teachers do that from a distance.

A few weeks ago, you could have been forgiven for temporarily forgetting about coronavirus as a little old-fashioned political controversy swirled that was not about Michael Flynn, either. Some Catholic bishops — including the president of the United States Conference of Catholic bishops, Archbishop José Gómez of Los Angeles, and the archbishop of New York, Cardinal Timothy Dolan — participated in a phone call with the president of the United States and some 600 Catholic leaders and educators. Critics saw it as a campaign rally. Donald Trump did say some characteristic things to give one that impression. But the bishops' participation was something else: an acknowledgment of a tragic reality. We are losing a vital national resource: Catholic schools. They are closing and need help if they are going to survive. Obviously, with coronavirus, that problem has only gotten worse. Teachers at tuition-dependent schools wonder if they will have jobs come fall, given the financial pain that people are feeling and the challenges of distance-learning. Just the other day, a mother who works at home told me that she's probably just going to make her new normal

is the teaching virtual, so is the ministering. So much of the witness and encounter is limited. The grace of the place begs for encounters of both the natural and the supernatural kind. Obviously, not everyone can pick up and start homeschooling. But what if you can't make the kind of financial sacrifices you used to for a Catholic education?

Anyone who has been watching online Masses knows that. There's no approaching Father for confession in a moment before Mass as your heart needs healing. We're not physically present for the greatest prayer there is, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Community and fellowship are important, of course. So is the charity, which many churches and church institutions have still found ways to provide. But for Catholics who do truly believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the desire for it in these coronavirus times can be agonizing. It's an opportunity for growth in gratitude, for sure. Never in my life did I think that church doors would have to be anything but "welcome" during Mass. Sure, for years now there have been counterterrorism police patrolling St. Patrick's Cathedral, where I often find myself in New York, but this is a whole new solidarity with the persecuted Church, the people who put their lives on the line as they try to worship God, because of the existential threat of terrorism, a horrific evil that can become the main fact of their lives. Here, an evil virus forces new protocols, which we cooperate with because we love one another. And yet we also know that to be who we are called to be, the sacramental life must find a way. The doctors who have been advising churches on how to do this safely are tremendous blessings. And some of that medical advice comes in because the docs themselves are hungry for the spiritual food that is their sustenance for daily living.

While the constitutional-law analysts make predictions about how the Court will rule in *Our Lady of Guadalupe School* case, which the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty just argued before the Supreme Court, there really is much more to it.

schools in the first place? And what do they say about us and what we value? And what are our priorities? That children be tested according to the current trends in education, or that they know the treasures of creation and civilization and have hope? Catholic schools have been known to save lives in the inner city and beyond.

As is chronicled in the 2015 *Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools' Importance in Urban America*, neighborhoods suffer when a Catholic school closes. It's not just the closing of a school, but the loss of an essential haven in the life of the community.

Why do we have what we have and do what we do? This moment can't be for falling back into old ways where we were losing our moorings. Now is for creative renewal. Everything may not look the same, but let's remember what we've valued and why, and let's move forward with a devotion to human flourishing that reverences the transcendent in all of us.

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