

Notebook

Women religious recognized for their gift to Catholic education

Sister Miriam Martin is a full-time Associate Professor of Practical Theology at the Faculty of Theology at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, where she is director of religious education programs.

Sr. Miriam was the guest speaker at the recent Christian Community Day event held at Bishop Smith Catholic School. Before a large audience of Catholic educators, Sr. Miriam spoke on the importance of Catholic schools, claiming their role as global stewards of the Earth and the environment.

But, let's look at the history of sisters.

Sr. Miriam notes, "Most women's religious communities came out of the prophetic call to ministry. The sisters saw a human need that wasn't being responded to by others."

In most Catholic school systems, the foundations began with religious men and women, she says.

An example of the sisters' ongoing concern for religious education can be seen in Sr. Miriam's present position at Saint Paul University. She has been appointed as The Mercy and Presentation Sisters of Newfoundland Chair in Religious Education and Catechetics. It was established by a major gift of \$1 million from The Mercy and Presentation Sisters of Newfoundland, who wished to support work in the areas of religious education and catechetics at Saint Paul University as part of their overall

efforts on the local, regional and national levels to promote activities in line with their charisms and missions.

Sr. Miriam holds a Doctorate in Education from the University of Toronto, a Master's of Religious Education from the University of St. Michael's College, a Bachelor's Degree majoring in English and a teaching certificate.

Sr. Miriam's research and writing has been largely in the area of women and worship, eco-theology and religious education. She spreads a message that promotes peace, justice and the integrity of all creation.

Tony Cosentino, Religious Education Coordinator of the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board, notes Sr. Miriam has guided many Catholic educators and parishioners over the years to grow in their faith and they, in turn, have returned to their schools, homes and parishes to help animate others with a living active witness to their Catholic faith.

Following her talk at the Christian Community Day event, Michele Arbour, Director of Education for the school board, said, "Sister Miriam's message and work are reminders of how each of us are called to claim our role as global stewards, as expressed in our board's vision statement."

At the event, there were many distinguished religious women joining the celebration, including members of the Grey Sisters, Sisters of St. Joseph, Holy

Cross Sisters, Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul and one sister from the Presentation Sisters Newfoundland and Labrador.

Nuns have changed in some ways over the years, notes Sr. Miriam, going from wearing habits to everyday clothing. However, she says, "Most of us wear something, a symbol that is indicative of our commitment."

For her community, it's a ring, while for the Grey Sisters, it's a cross, whether on the lapel or around the neck, she points out.

"The symbols are much more subtle," she said, comparing them to the clothing nuns used to wear.

Sacrifices are also a part of everyday life and something sisters are used to, Sr. Miriam says. When the schools were being started, for example, anything the sisters earned usually went back to support the schools.

The challenges were also personal, she notes.

"They often went where others would not or could not go," she says. "They would teach where it was difficult, where it was isolated."

If you look at health care and education, in many Catholic contexts, you will find a "strong influence" of the sisters, she adds.

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Women religious were recognized at Christian Community Day at Bishop Smith Catholic High School in Pembroke recently.

A message from the Director of Education

When I reflect on the gift that is Catholic education, I am reminded of the religious sisters whom we honoured recently at the RCCDSB's celebration of Christian Community Day. The annual event provides an opportunity for our educational community to think about our roles as members of the Catholic faith, and to share ideas and concerns about our challenges and achievements over the year.

Attending the event this year were several sisters from different religious

communities that have worked in our Catholic schools over the years. These sisters and others of their congregations were the pioneers who built the Catholic school system. They made great sacrifices and exhibited tremendous dedication and courage to lay the groundwork for our present system.

Today the women religious continue to lead and to teach, often taking on the toughest assignments to bring the gift of Catholic education to the most needy.

A recent trip to the Dominican Republic, for instance, gave some of our secondary students a first-hand look at what the Grey Sisters do at their mission in Yamasa.

You can read more about these subjects in this issue of Notebook. You can also find out what parents, students and our local parishes can do to share in this wonderful gift that is Catholic education.

Michele Arbour
Director of Education

Message from the Diocese: Don't be the missing link

In Catholic education, we often refer to the link between parish, home and school. Just think of how blessed we are to have the freedom to bring these dimensions together. As we know already, this is not the reality everywhere in Canada.

In many respects, the parish, the home and the school all serve unique purposes and functions, but what they have in common is much more than some kind of professional relationship. The common link that is shared goes even beyond ourselves and our individual families. Our common Catholic Christian belief in the risen Lord is the bond that brings us together. The parish is the local community of the faithful where we encounter Christ in the sacramental life of the Church. It is in the parish church that we celebrate the fullness of our faith each weekend at Sunday Mass, being spiritually fed with the Body and

Blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Without this weekly nourishment, our souls weaken. The home is what we often refer to as the "domestic church" since it is the place where persons are nourished with the gift of family love and where children are to be taught about the faith by parents through word and example, as promised to God at a child's baptism. The school is naturally the place where minds and characters are shaped through learning, questioning and growth, opening our children to the mysteries and skills of life. At their best, the bonds of the parish, home and school should not be seen as just three different organizations that somehow have something in common, since together they fulfill the mission of Christ's Church. Our belief and relationship with Him, in the context of the worshipping community is the central axis to all of this, and from

this centre flows the living out of our faith in the places where we live and study. Take a minute and think about how each of these dimensions fulfills the mission of Christ. If we all have our foundation in the mission of the universal Church, then it also means that the parish community, the home and the school have unique tasks that cannot be fulfilled by anyone else. A school could never replace the teaching of the Catholic faith that is the right and duty of parents any more than the parish takes responsibility for the teaching of geometry or social studies! When we fulfill our respective duties and callings by doing what is proper as parents, teachers and priests, then we are all giving our children the very best and carrying out the common mission of Christ and His Church. How strong is your link?

Father Ryan Holly

Parent Involvement Committee, April 2011



The new Parent Involvement Committee (PIC) has evolved a great deal in the last few months and we are excited about the opportunities ahead that will enhance parent involvement and, more importantly, enhance student achievement.

Our goal for the rest of this school year is to continue spreading the word about PIC and recruiting parent representatives from across Renfrew County.

PIC is your opportunity to be involved on a board level and be the voice for your child's school. Essentially, it's the school council to your own school council.

Geographically, the RCCDSB is so large that the issues and needs of each school are vastly different. Therefore, it is important that we have representation from each of our families of schools on the committee.

Our first official meeting was held in February and was attended by Director of Education Michele Arbour, trustees and principals. This meeting helped to lay the foundation of the role PIC will play at the board level and how it can assist individual schools in achieving their goals. We are extremely fortunate to have such a high level of support from the board in this endeavour.

March 2 marked a wonderful evening as we hosted principals, parent council chairpersons, and student representatives along with trustees and board members at a special event promoting PIC. About 140 people attended and we were honoured to have His Excellency Bishop Mulhall attend to give a special presentation on the importance of home, school and parish.

I had the privilege of attending the second annual PIC symposium in Toronto where I spent time networking with other PIC members from across the province and taking part in a variety of workshops. This was a wonderful learning experience and I

gained a wealth of information and ideas from the other participants.

A major role of any PIC is to make all parent groups aware of a variety of grants and funding available to every school council—in particular, the Ontario Parents Reaching Out Grant valued at \$1,000 each. Councils can submit a proposal to the Ministry focused on engaging parents and supporting school-based initiatives. I encourage each school to apply and take on a special project to help communicate with your school community.

Although there are only a couple of months left of the school year, our communication will continue over the summer in preparation for our first fall meeting.

If you have any questions about PIC or would like to get involved, please don't hesitate to contact me directly at 613-623-9892 or email at hmittchellpower@rccdsb.edu.on.ca

Hazel Power, Chair

Student conference looks to the future of Catholic education

Catholic school students receive a unique educational gift: the opportunity to learn and grow in a faith-based environment with support and guidance from members of their own Catholic community. Our students develop not only the tools and knowledge that they will need to be healthy, happy and productive citizens in society, they also acquire the spiritual strength and knowledge that will guide them in the way of Jesus, and sustain them in times of need.

The immense value of Catholic education sometimes can be forgotten in the daily routine. But a conference held recently in Niagara Falls highlighted the value of that gift for some students in the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board.

From March 31 to April 2, more than 400 secondary school students, student trustees, staff and partners in Catholic education from English and French school boards from across the province attended the first Catholic Student Leadership Conference.



Brad Lair, Student Council President, Bishop Smith Catholic High School, Julia Rowat, Student Council President, St. Joseph's Catholic High School, and Katie Brooks, RCCDSB Student Trustee at the conference gala dinner.

Students attending from the RCCDSB were: Brad Lair, Student Council President at Bishop Smith Catholic High School, Julia Rowat, Student Council President at St. Joseph's Catholic High School, and Katie Brooks, RCCDSB Student Trustee.

David Rowat, teacher at St. Joseph's Catholic School in Renfrew, and Mary-Lise Rowat, principal of St. Joseph's Catholic School in Arnprior, also attended as supervisors/staff moderators.

Titled *Lighting the Way*, the conference focused on discussions about the essential importance, impact and future of publicly funded Catholic education in our society today—in Ontario, Canada, and around the world. The main topics of the conference were:

- As Ontario Catholic Students We Believe;
- Our Strengths—Highlights of Being a Catholic Student;
- Our Collective Vision for the 21st Century Catholic Learner; and
- Challenges Catholic Education May Face Over the Next Ten Years.

As well as listening to keynote speakers, the students participated in two youth forums.

Julia Rowat said of the conference, "OCSLC was a beneficial experience that I was fortunate enough to be a part of. It has helped me to gain a renewed perspective on St. Joe's strengths and areas of improvement in Catholic education. This conference has helped me in my work with Student Council as we look forward with enthusiasm to beginning new initiatives in the next school year."

Mary-Lise Rowat, principal at St. Joseph's, said the conference "was a worthwhile adventure for the students—sort of like a big Catholic teenager think-tank. Students constructed a vision for Catholic schools that was not influenced by adult facilitators—student-led, student-driven sessions. As you might expect, inclusivity and acceptance of others was at the top of their list as were social justice initiatives."

The next Catholic Student Leadership conference is to be held in Ottawa in 2013. It will be co-hosted by the Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario and the Ottawa Catholic School Board.

Women religious

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But, for the sisters, it's much more than sacrifice and what they are wearing.

Their core belief is about relationships, "the idea of belonging to a religious community and dedicating their life to God in the service of others."

And for this reason, they do not marry, Sr. Miriam notes. "They want to be able to be free to serve where they are needed."

Arbour spoke from the book by Mark McGowan, *The Enduring Gift*. It was stated that Catholic religious orders dominated the teaching ranks in schools, adapted to new curricular changes and donated much of their salary back to our schools.

"The women who have been our teachers and leaders for decades have indeed given us a rich heritage; a gift that needs to be celebrated and sustained for many generations to come," Arbour says.

Sister Joan Cronin, Executive Director of the Institute for Catholic Education,

recognizes the living endowment of Catholic education in Renfrew County, which is the major contribution the religious orders have made in this region of Ontario. Their exemplary reputation for quality Catholic education through teaching took root because the sisters believed that "to educate is to lead others to truth, to draw forth, to provide opportunity and to promote human dignity."

Today, for the most part, the sisters no longer teach in the schools and that is why, during the Christian Community Day event, the Sisters and their efforts on behalf of Catholic education were recognized.

These sisters met with the teachers of today.

"We link the past and the many fine works of our sisters in education with the present and our own meaningful vocations in Catholic education," says Arbour. "Let us pray that each of us sees

clearly our part in this story and with joy and enthusiasm shares the good news of Jesus Christ with our school communities."

Sr. Miriam is also a singer-songwriter and a musician. In 2007, she released her third CD of contemporary spiritual music titled *A New Dreaming*. This is an expression of Sr. Miriam's experience and her desire to spread a message that promotes peace, justice and the integrity of all creation.

"This is a collection of dreaming, mine, the community's and those who have helped to call out the poetry and melodies from the great Source of creativity."

Bob Schreader, Chair of the Renfrew County Catholic School Board, sees Sr. Miriam's presence at the Christian Community Day as "a clear sign of Renfrew County Catholic schools' ongoing dedication to making a difference as faith-filled community builders."

Home—school—parish connection

The church, family, and school community are all active participants and support one another in the Catholic education of our children. This collaboration empowers all members to contribute their unique gifts to enhance the development of spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social and physical capabilities of each individual.

Throughout our communities, there are many examples of the partnerships between parish, home and school in the form of shared celebrations, communications or buildings.

Each grade at St. Casimir's Catholic School in Round Lake takes a turn leading the prayer at the school's monthly Mass at St. Casimir's Church. Many school community services are celebrated at the church as well.

At Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School in Pembroke, the student choir meets at the church to practise, while Father Kenney is a regular visitor at the school.

The preparation of students for Confirmation and First Communion are school-wide activities, and teachers take students to the church for quiet reflection and prayer.



Father Kenney joins the cast of the Passion Play at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School.

This interconnectedness of home, school and parish strengthens Catholic education and helps our students to embrace Christian values and live their faith every day.

Students on DR trip inspired by “biggest smile in the world”

The beauty of a toothless smile! The joy of making a young woman's dream of attending university come true!

Those are just some of the warm memories shared by students who participated in the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board's Dominican Republic Experience from February 11 to 18.

The RCCDSB organizes an annual trip for secondary students to the Grey Sisters' Dominican Republic mission in the small community of Yamasa. The students also visit schools in the region, stay with local families and make trips to the poorest areas of the region to deliver aid packages.

Peggy Dunne, the chaplain at Bishop Smith Catholic High School, is one of the trip organizers. She says the students meet regularly before the trip to talk about the

Third World and prepare themselves for what they will experience. They also hold fund-raising events in Renfrew County for donations of food, educational and medical aid to the communities they visit. This year the students raised a total of \$70,000.

Dunne says the students had wonderful stories to tell on their return home. “Our students met many wonderful people who opened their hearts to them. Pablo was a man the group met while delivering food to the poorer section of Yamasa. His beautiful, toothless smile captivated and inspired them.”

For Natalie Beaupre, a student at Bishop Smith Catholic High School, the trip was a journey of discovery. “You don't need possessions to have everything in the world. You don't need teeth to have

the biggest smile in the world,” she said, referring to Pablo. “You don't need to be best friends to feel great love from someone. You don't need abundance to have great faith.”

Several of the students were inspired by a young woman named Lysandra, who wants to go to university to get a teaching degree. But Lysandra told the students she couldn't afford the small tuition.

“The group pooled all of their Dominican cash and came up with exactly enough money to get her started,” Dunne reports. “We are now arranging to pay for all of the costs associated with her education.”

Alanah Nagora, a student at Bishop Smith, was very touched by Lysandra's situation. “I was so glad that we were able to not only meet this girl, but to be able to meet her needs. Nothing is a coincidence. God has a unique, special plan for each and every one of us.”

Jonathan Mulvihill, of St. Joseph's Catholic High School in Renfrew, summed up his experience with some advice, “Don't focus on changing the world all at once. Just try and change one person's life, because that's all it takes to give the world a brighter future.”

According to Shelley Montgomery, Principal at Our Lady of Grace in Westmeath and one of the trip supervisors, the experience in the Dominican Republic allows “young people to develop not only in their faith, but in their understanding of international development. Our new Dominican friends shared with us so many small acts—but with such great love!”



Rebecca MacLaren, Kiera Whitelock, Natalie Beaupre, new Dominican friend Pablo and Kaitlin Proksch.