

The earliest memory I have regarding priests involves an enormous sandwich and Notre Dame. I was four, going on five, and my dad took me to a Saturday evening mass at the church just a few blocks over from where we lived. I hardly remember any of the actual service -- just that I was kept occupied with a kiddy Bible and a container of Goldfish -- but the reception afterwards, I do recall. It was held in a space just off the church, and there were refreshments. After grabbing a plate, my dad and I set off to find the priest. I was entering the parish as a kindergartener the following year, so I guess my dad wanted to formally introduce us to the pastor. The room was small, so it didn't take too long for us to find him. He was sitting by himself at a table near the door and was chowing down on an impressively large sandwich. My dad tried talking to him about the parish and school community, but all he wanted to talk about was Notre Dame football -- maybe the Irish were playing Michigan that night, or something. So, we obliged. By the time I started at the parish as a student, that pastor was gone, but I've never forgotten the sandwich-eating, Notre Dame-loving priest.

Anyway, as I'm sure you can tell, Catholicism and Catholic education have played a significant role in my life. For the past seventeen years, I've been a baptized Catholic, and for the past thirteen years, I've been a student enrolled in Catholic schools. It would be an understatement to say they've been important -- they've been my home. For the past thirteen years, I've grown up in Catholic education. It's raised me, shaped me, and supported me along the way. The unique thing about Catholic education is that it's geared towards the individual. While test scores are important, they're not absolute. Instead, the person takes center-stage. That's the biggest thing I've noticed during my tenure in the system -- that people are more important than performance. Consequently, my time enrolled in Catholic schools has led me to develop primarily as a person, and secondarily as a student. The teachers I've come across -- especially at Saint Xavier -- have proved to be some of the most respectable people I've ever met, which is fortunate, because they're the ones setting the example for how to learn, live, and love in this life. Not only do they teach subject matter, but they teach the things of life that matter. They share stories that guide and compose themselves in ways that inspire. Some of the most meaningful conversations I've had with teachers over the years have occurred outside of the classroom setting. They weren't conversations about derivatives, particples, or atoms, but rather, conversations about livelihood, spirituality, or experiences. Teachers at Catholic schools are there because they want to be, and it shows.

Earlier, I said that in a Catholic school setting, academics take a backseat to character development. While that's true, I'd like to emphasize that Catholic education is still the paragon of academic prestige. With figures like Aquinas and Augustine, how could it not be? Over the last thirteen years, I've received an unparalleled education, and so have my classmates -- a couple of whom are headed off to the Ivy League and countless more to places like Vanderbilt, West Point, and the sandwich-eating priest's favorite... Notre Dame. I've yet to come across a single unqualified teacher within the Catholic school system, and that makes for engaging, enriching, and informative classroom action. Catholic schools are committed to academic excellence, and as a result, they regularly produce top-notch students.

With college starting next fall, and the rest of my life waiting on the horizon, I can firmly say that I feel well prepared as a result of these last thirteen years. I've met amazing people, have learned wondrous things, and can't wait to take those experiences with me thought the next thirteen years and beyond. I am the way I am because of Catholic education, and that's something I'm proud to say.

By Michael Pepa