

Taking a Turn

Our Guidance Counselor

By Dr. JERRY CAMMARATA

Cardinal O'Connor was the greatest guidance counselor the New York City Board of Education has ever had.

That may be an odd title to give the Archbishop of New York, but as a member of the board which holds in trust the education of our public school youngsters, it is one of the few I can add to the many he already has.

Our students go to their guidance counselors when they are perplexed by the choices they must make in their lives, or when they need to borrow the ear of a truly compassionate person. Our guidance counselors intervene in our students' lives when they see our young people charging headlong down a path to self-destruction.

So His Eminence was for us. We could turn to him when sorting out the conundrums we face as public educators, not for orders or easy, quick answers, but for inspiration, and the refreshing thoughts of a man calmly, solidly grounded in an other-centered morality, who drew his ideas from a rich understanding of people's needs.

And he raised his voice in warning when he believed we might act in the name of political expedience, or with a false compassion based on sentimentality, or when we were about to settle

for the easy answers of an easy morality because we did not have enough faith in our young people's ability to rise to the challenges of a life well-lived.

As archbishop, he wrote often of the need for our public schools to imbue our children with the "American values" he himself had learned as a small boy attending public schools in Philadelphia, values like honesty, respect, chastity and purity, and a reverence for human life, the values of the then-legal Ten Commandments. Though the cardinal was a deeply thoughtful, well-read man, he seemed almost as bewildered when speaking of those who want to remove these values from our schools. He did not seem so much to disagree with their position as to be unable to grasp why anyone would object to these commandments as an outline of morality for everyone.

He pleaded with the board to believe in our young people, to believe that they are worth believing in, and not to sell them short or sell them out, whether that meant choosing to teach them to aspire to chastity through abstinence, or rejecting curricula that treated true marriage as merely one option among many for family life.



He never failed to remind us of our duties to all of our children. It is no surprise to those who know something of the cardinal's life that he was a champion of education for God's special little ones, the developmentally disabled and handicapped. He began his priestly career by touching the lives of the mentally retarded. He respected all human life, but he seemed to care most for those who needed the most care, and his advocacy on their behalf was never lost on us, who must oversee the public schools' special education classes.

Finally, the cardinal ever reminded us of the principle enunciated by St. Thomas More, that martyr, philosopher, saint and government administrator of long ago: "When statesmen forsake their private consciences for the sake of public duty, they lead their country by a short route to chaos."

When our students graduate, they leave their guidance counselors behind. Our guidance counselor has graduated, though, and we, his students, are left to ponder his lessons.

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