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[<< Mon., May. 28](#)

Editorials

Bill Reel: In Manchester, a happy school where Christ guides all

By BILL REEL

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When I was in prep school in the 1950s our day began with mandatory chapel. We sang hymns, heard Scripture, recited prayers. This routine meant little to an impious schoolboy, but faith took hold over the following decades and today I'm grateful for formation in Christian belief half a century ago.

Daily chapel no longer prevails at my old school, but recently I visited a relatively new school where it's pre-eminent. Christianity permeates Holy Family Academy in Manchester.

Holy Family opened in 2000 after three years of prayer, planning and plenty of elbow grease by volunteers to rehabilitate the former Chandler School at 49 Ashland St. The venerable brick building had been abandoned and was dilapidated. The Holy Family founders, a small group of lay Catholics, purchased it for \$1 from the city. Refurbished, it has a sturdy, welcoming, old-school look.

Visiting Holy Family was uplifting and reassuring not only because the faith is kept devoutly but also because the students resemble those of bygone days. Boys wear jackets and neckties. Girls wear modest skirts. Disheveled chic, the style so popular nowadays, is blessedly absent.

At 8 a.m. boys and girls file in quietly and reverently for chapel. Along with hymns, prayers and Bible readings, a brief sermon is preached. The day I visited, Karl Cooper, dean of faculty and academics, quoted Psalm 115: "Not to us, O Lord, but to your name give glory." He developed that thought in a pithy homily admonishing the congregation of kids never to boast of successes but always to thank God humbly for whatever they achieve.

The boys and girls in the pews listened attentively, and a visitor thought how fortunate they were to be exposed so young to such practical spiritual wisdom.

A busy day of demanding classes follows chapel at Holy Family, which in 2006 was recognized as one of the top 50 Catholic high schools in the nation by the Michigan-based Catholic High School Honor Roll, whose advisors include the presidents of Catholic University of America and Franciscan University of Steubenville.

In twelfth-grade modern literature, Mrs. Rose McAvoy asked students to describe a family they'd read about in a Flannery O'Connor short story she'd assigned. "Unhappy" and "dysfunctional" were proposed. Mrs. McAvoy pushed for an explanation of the family's unhappiness, and a consensus emerged that the behavior of individual family members showed them to be selfish, willful and emotionally remote. A discussion ensued of how those sorry shortcomings are the bane of modern family life.

The topic in Mr. Tom Pietropaoli's eighth-grade catechism class was grace. "What is grace?" he asked. A soft-spoken boy answered that grace "is a gift freely given by God," and, apparently wishing to cover the full range of definitions, added that grace might also describe "the way someone walks or moves." This earnest answer prompted giggling, and amiable Mr. Pietropaoli smiled and said, "Very good." Holy Family is a happy school, a visitor thought.

In Mr. Cooper's Latin class students translated a passage from St. Augustine's "Confessions" expressing the concept that God experiences past, present and future all at once and lives in the "eternal present." A visitor was impressed that 17-year-olds were grappling with this deep thought that no doubt vexes theologians.

After classes came a chat with two Holy Family founders and administrators, Mrs. Mary Mosher and Mrs. Lucille Fortin. They recalled how in the spring of 1997, along with other parents committed to Catholic education, they began to meet regularly to pray for a school worthy of the best of the Catholic tradition. Three years later Holy Family opened with 22 students in grades 7 through 12.

Enrollment has grown steadily and is up to 67, with 74 expected in the fall. The ultimate goal is 90 boys and girls, 15 per class. Financial challenges are unrelenting, but a committee has been formed to build an endowment for the school by 2015.

"My faith has grown more in the past 10 years than in the previous 46," Mary Mosher said with a big smile that, to a visitor, looked divine.

Bill Reel is a retired journalist in North Sutton.