WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL
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A LIFETIME OF SERVICE
IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION
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As a new member of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference staff, this is my first opportunity to reflect upon the primary policy areas I monitor in the state legislature, education and health care.

Generally speaking there aren't many laws passed in Wisconsin affecting Catholic education. This may leave some under the impression that a clear connection between Catholic education and public policy doesn’t exist. Everyone understands new laws have the potential to affect Catholic schools, but many do not recognize how Catholic education affects the development of public policy.

In my own experience, I have realized how Catholic education has focused my commitment to public service. Growing up my family moved several times, but my parents managed to send me to Catholic school from kindergarten through high school. I transferred from a public university after my sophomore year of college to attend and graduate from Marquette University. And in graduate school, I had the opportunity to teach fifth graders religious education.

In all my experiences, I felt there was something unique in Catholic education. It was something beyond the building, activities, academics, and even beyond the symbols of faith. Through my Catholic education I learned what it means to be “called to serve.”

Catholic education emphasizes that service can be more than something that you do for a few hours on the weekend, or even for a few years. Service is a life commitment and we, as Catholics, should value those career and volunteer opportunities that allow us to offer daily service to our community.

My education in public service wasn’t just taught to me in words. It was shown through example. As a student I saw members of religious orders fulfill a lifetime commitment to serving others. I saw service performed daily through the work of the Sister who managed the religious education program in which I taught. It was shown to me through the teachers, administrators, and catechists who gave of time and opportunity to work in Catholic education.

I saw it in staff, parents, and volunteers; people who served on school boards, parish councils, finance committees, and a myriad of other groups. Then I started to notice how many of those parents and volunteers worked in careers dedicated to public service – police officers,
firefighters, lawyers, judges, doctors, nurses, day care providers, public officials, and other callings.

In the Catholic Church, public service is a value. We are taught that being called to serve, and fulfilling that call, offers more than positions that provide better pay, better hours, and less stress. Public service teaches you to value people, not just when they are vulnerable or in need, but also in their ordinary, everyday form.

It is because I have learned first-hand through my Catholic education the value of public service that I felt compelled serve in the public forum as well. It is also the reason I am not surprised to discover how many public servants I meet were “raised Catholic,” or received a Catholic education. There are many reasons to monitor the interaction of Catholic education and public policy, but perhaps one of the most important, is to bear witness to how the leaders of tomorrow are shaped by the example of Catholic education today.