
CLOSING OF THE JUBILEE SCHOOLS, MEMPHIS

BY KAREN PULFER FOCHT

As the month of May wound down, the halls of the Jubilee Catholic schools in Memphis became still. Their school year came to an end as it has for the last 20 years.

Only this time, when they reopen in the fall, they will not be Catholic schools. They will become charter schools.

Boxes of religious books sat near statues, waiting to be removed. Children picked up rosaries and prayer cards as they passed through the halls from tables that were filled with church materials, library books and other religious items that are no longer going to be allowed inside these schools.

The little hands of a child at Our Lady of Sorrows held a new cross and rosary tightly. She was so proud of her treasures.

A principal tears up while talking about the school's closing. She knows that her work is God's work and that it is important work.

A young child looks at a statue of Mary as she says her prayers for the last time with her classmates before heading to the car line on the last day of school.

Teenage Sudanese refugees giggle and whisper in their native language, quickly changing back to English when their teacher calls on them.

Students pass an armless Jesus that hangs in the hallways of Memphis Catholic with a plaque that reads "We Are His Arms In The World." The crucifix will be gone when they return.

In 1999 a multimillion-dollar donation from an anonymous group of donors allowed for the re-opening of the first Jubilee schools in hopes of educating some of the cities poorest children. The resurrection of several once closed Catholic inner city schools, was called a "Miracle in Memphis."

But now, for teachers and administrators who know what these schools mean in the lives of their students, that miracle seems to be vanishing before their eyes.

Due to financial shortfalls, the Catholic Diocese of Memphis closed their Jubilee schools at the end of the 2018-2019 school year. The endowment wasn't enough to sustain a school system serving approximately 1,500

mostly non-Catholic students, many of whom went to school paying little or no tuition.

Principal of Our Lady of Sorrows in Frayser, Connie Hegwood, says the parents of her students want their children to go to Catholic Schools. She knows many of them will no longer be able to afford to send them to the few (tuition charging) Catholic Schools that remain.

A lifelong educator once said of these children, "we educate them because we are Catholic, not because they are."

"We teach the children who need us," she said in 2011. "When we closed those schools, we left more than old buildings behind. We left children, and those children need us now more than ever."



Now those Catholic schools are closing a second time and many of those children still need the church. Many of them are still the poorest of the poor, many are refugees, many are unchurched, and many still go hungry, many long for moral boundaries, role models, messages of love and a spiritual connection.

Many of the Jubilee schools children will be going on to the charter schools that will be teaching in the same buildings. These children will still be offered an education, but they will no longer be allowed a holy atmosphere, allowed to pray in class, and the day-to-day spiritual formation that many parents were seeking in a Catholic education.

The schools which will convert to the charter, in addition to St. Michael, are St. Therese Little Flower Primary, De La Salle Elementary, St. Augustine Elementary, St. Patrick Elementary, St. John Elementary, Our Lady of Sorrows Elementary, St. Joseph Elementary, Resurrection Elementary and Memphis Catholic Middle and High School. More than 1,500 students attended those schools.

A statement from the diocese cites the rise of charter schools, the creation of six suburban public school districts and "the increasing financial challenges for our diocese and our Jubilee Catholic Schools."

The statement also makes clear that while the charter school network won't be affiliated with the diocese, it will "benefit from the strong academic foundation and values formed over the last two decades by the Jubilee Catholic Schools." †