

Culture of Life: Livin' Large

For us kids, summers in the '60s were special. With no threat of school, we got to stay up late. We could play outside until dark, sometimes even later. A late night outside was livin' large. But we couldn't stay out forever. That television commercial always reminded our folks: "Parents, it's 10:30. Do you know where your children are?"

The next day would find us roaming the neighborhood, but Mom knew where we were at noon. We'd be home, watching Chicago radio and TV personality Bob Bell ply his craft. Except to us, he wasn't Bell. He was a man in a bright blue jump suit and a foot-wide ruffled collar, his head ringed in flaming orange hair, his face covered in white cream, a painted smile running from here to there, and a red nose as big as a plum. Oh, and he wore size 24 shoes. Bozo the Clown made us smile, a lot. With his deep belly laugh and his cast of crazy clown side-kicks, Bozo was larger than life. He brought joy to a city-full of kids.

Fast-forward about two decades. We were grown-ups, married and with kids of our own. Bozo was still on the air, though Bell had retired. One day, we learned that we won four tickets to the live TV broadcast of the 25th anniversary Bozo show. Chicago dignitaries feted Bozo. His clown buddies were all there. Two lucky kids played the Grand Prize Game for a trip to Disneyworld. But the highlight of the show was at the end. The new Bozo—no slouch himself—introduced Bob Bell, who this time appeared in his street clothes. The audience stood in applause—and wouldn't stop. We clapped so long that the broadcast ran into the next hour's television programming. It was easy to understand the reaction of the adults. Bozo had touched our lives. I still treasure my photo of Bozo and his second-banana Cookie posing with two of our daughters. It was the moment my kids met old friends.

What we experience in childhood can affect us for the rest of our lives. And much of that experience happens in school. So when Labor Day came, we were back in school. And for most kids in the neighborhood, it was back to our parish school. From the very first U.S. mission school in 1606, the Catholic school system has grown into the largest non-public system in the nation. By the mid-'60s, 5.7 million children were enrolled in Catholic elementary schools, with additional students in Catholic high schools and colleges. We learned the three Rs—reading, writing and arithmetic. And we learned a fourth and most important one: religion. Taught by dedicated nuns and lay staff, we received a well-grounded education that prepared us for advanced learning and life.

But today, Catholic education faces a challenge we never experienced. It isn't the loss of nuns, which greatly increased costs and drove many to the public school system. The new challenge is preparing our kids to face the onslaught of the culture of death. Back in the '60s, abortion wasn't legal; it wasn't even thinkable. Now it is being extolled as necessary and even good. The message is loud and continuous, and for many people the culture of "me first" is overwhelming the message coming from our Catholic schools. Picture a First Communion class, innocents wearing their white dresses and ties. Statistically, [almost three of every ten girls](#) will ultimately have an abortion. A like percentage of boys will be involved. And most of the others just won't care. Another value is speaking to them, and like sponges, they are soaking it in. It's all so sad

because the Catholic school system provides us an incredible opportunity to defeat the culture of death. Its job in educating the next generations must be to *consciously and constantly* instill a value so strong that it will remain with our children for life.

Education for life must rest on four pillars. The first is an *awe* of God's creation. Starting at the earliest stages, our children need to experience the marvels of all life. They need to see how life grows from the smallest of things. In concrete yet simple ways, the kids need to be its caretakers. They need to understand how all life and all creation is interconnected. And at every step, they need to realize that God's Hand is in all of it. He is the Author of life, and every bit of life is very good.

The second pillar is a *vision* of life's potential. No two people are exactly alike. God has formed an amazing orchestra in which every person is an instrument. Understanding our potential means realizing our capacities for good and evil. Our kids must be inspired by stories of people who rose from tough beginnings to do great and heroic things. They need to understand the havoc that evil creates and see that all evil is a crime against life itself. At the appropriate time, they need to learn about the evil of abortion—a deadly sin that robs the world of God's greatest creations.

The third pillar is an *authentic love* that sacrifices all for God and others. That's what Jesus had and did. Unfortunately, we have convinced ourselves that we are not called to be martyrs. It's like telling soldiers that they're not called to fight. When trouble comes, we are unprepared and so run away. Even in our Church, we fall for today's political correctness, which tells us not to speak the truth for fear of "offending" someone, as if the truth were offensive. We need to develop in our youth a warrior's spirit that puts others ahead of self. It is not a spirit of belligerence but one of joy, a spirit that will gladly speak and witness in defense of life.

And the fourth pillar? It's not a concept at all. It is *us*. What our children learn in school will be ineffective if we aren't reinforcing it with our lives. Kids can hear our words, but they'll more notice our attitudes and actions. What are they allowed to see and hear in our homes? Are we taking them to weekly Mass, and if so, do they ever hear a message that prepares them to battle the culture in defense of life?

Education for life. For God. For good. It's truly livin' large.

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