

NEW YORK POST

A 'rule' for schools: Building hope in Newark

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September 10, 2014 | 2:15am

<http://nypost.com/2014/09/10/a-rule-for-schools-building-hope-in-newark/>



One of the most astonishing things about how Catholic schools educate kids in our country's worst neighborhoods is that they're by and large serving a population that isn't Catholic.

It didn't have to be this way. In fact, it almost wasn't. That's one bottom line of the powerful new film "The Rule," from Jerome Bongiorno and Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno of Newark.

Released last week, “The Rule” is a documentary about St. Benedict’s, a Catholic high school in Newark’s heart that for a century and a half has served as an academic haven for the often-embattled young men there.

The school is run by the monks of Newark Abbey in accord with the principles set out in the 1,500-year old Rule of Saint Benedict. Originally intended as a guide for creating self-governing communities of faith in 6th century Italy, the rule can also turn poor, sometimes neglected boys into young men of integrity and promise.

St. Benedict’s graduates virtually all its students and sends them on to college, where 85 percent finish. By comparison, less than a third of Newark’s public-high-school students graduate in four years.

The secrets to St. Benedict’s success are no mystery. The teachers are dedicated and invested in the students’ lives. Some students live on campus, removing them from the distractions of chaotic homes. There is zero tolerance for drugs, violence or gangs. One offense and you’re out.

As one monk says, “You can only be in one gang — ours.”

The students are given a lot of responsibility. Student-body leaders run the morning assembly. They talk to other kids who are giving teachers problems. They can even alter the day’s schedule if necessary.

The monks take kids out of a city plagued by violence and poverty, and prepare them for a better life.

When the school opened in 1868, it large served Irish and German immigrants; later, Poles and Slavs. Over the course of the decades, these groups moved up the socioeconomic ladder and left for the suburbs.

By the mid-20th century, parents were sending their middle-class white suburban kids into the city to be educated at St. Benedicts, though the school also started giving scholarships to black students in the city.

At any point, St. Benedict’s could’ve moved to be closer to the majority of the kids it was serving. Plenty of religious institutions of all stripes did. The monks stayed.

Then came the 1967 riots. Many of the monks were justifiably “petrified,” in the words of Fr. Edwin Leahy. They were an island of whites in a sea of racial violence.

Some said it was time to close the school and move elsewhere, but the monks needed two-thirds of their members to favor such a plan. Instead, they deadlocked. It was like a “family feud over the family business,” says historian Tom McCabe.

In the end, 14 monks packed up one day and left. The school closed for a year. But then it reopened with a new sense of purpose, a truly “prophetic” mission, as one monk explains. “We were here to confront the sin of racism.”

“What I had gotten, I wanted other kids to have,” says Father Ed, who graduated from St. Benedict’s in 1963, returned a few years later and now serves as headmaster.

Throughout “The Rule,” you see him counseling, cajoling and arguing with the students to get them to see the value of that education and their responsibility to others in this world.

The motto that forms the basis of this community is “whatever hurts my brother hurts me,” and students take that to heart.

In trying to explain the success of St. Benedict’s amidst the failure of Newark, Father Ed says, “what we don’t have in Newark is a sense of connectedness, that’s why people can shoot each other.” That’s probably true.

At the start of “The Rule,” the filmmakers ask whether the elements of St. Benedict’s rule could “be used to rehabilitate a whole city?”

The answer, sadly, is no. We need intact, two-parent families and schools that are there for the kids, not the teachers. We need order enforced by effective policing. We need economic opportunity that comes from an educated and entrepreneurial population.

In the meantime, though, there are people like the monks of St. Benedict’s who will risk everything, who will devote their entire lives to raising up the kids who aren’t even from their own religious community.

And for that we must give thanks.