

Guest Commentary: Religious education lifts spirits of students

By Mary C. McDonald, Special to The Commercial Appeal

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On a recent school visit to Holy Names Catholic School, one of our reopened Jubilee Schools in the inner city of Memphis, I asked the students in a seventh-grade religion class what they are studying.

The students raised their hands, waving them in the air to get my attention. I called on Nicole. She stood up, put the chair back under her desk, and said, "the Resurrection." I asked if she knew what that meant. "Yes," she said proudly, "it means redemption and a new life for us, because Jesus died on the cross on Good Friday for us."

She stood, waiting, her eyes looking over her glasses for a sign of approval. Her classmates nodded in agreement with her, showing me they knew that she gave the correct answer. "Excellent!" I said. "There is great learning happening here, and great teaching!"

The religion curriculum in all the grades of our schools calls for the study of Christ's life, death and Resurrection during the Lenten season. It is an academic goal. However, in our religion classes there is also a spiritual goal. The students know the material. It is equally important that they understand what they are learning, and how it will lift them, so they become good citizens, good leaders and good people of faith.

I think Jubilee School students find the Lenten study of Christ's death and resurrection particularly meaningful. After being closed for many years, these eight schools were reopened to serve a population in poverty. They bridge that divide of poverty in our city with hope. Just when you think everything is over, that will be the beginning. What better reminder for these schools of a new beginning than the Easter season and the Resurrection?

This class knew their lesson, but what about the other schools, and the other classes? Their assignments would be due soon. What would the rest of the children in the Jubilee Schools say about Easter, the Resurrection, and new life?

I asked the principals of the Jubilee Schools to send the students' work to me after it had been graded, so that I could see what they know, in their minds and hearts, about Easter. Easter, for these children who have so little, is not about chocolate bunnies, jelly beans or Easter egg hunts. It is about hope, and a promise of a new life. It is a message too good not to share.

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