

Should we send our kids to Catholic School?

Your Faith

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Someone told me that, as Catholics, we are supposed to send our kids to Catholic schools. We are wondering if it's really worth the financial struggle; are we obligated to do this?

Thank you for asking this: it's quite the important issue. I've been blessed to serve as a priest for a little more than 17 years, and every assignment I've been given in that time has had a school connected to it. Over the years, I've really come to see that Catholic schools are a great gift God offers us; a gift that we often overlook.

Is Catholic education a sacrifice? Of course. If it's not, you're doing it wrong. Catholic education, for many people, is a great sacrifice.

It's a sacrifice for the teachers who, in my experience, are paid significantly less than their public school counterparts. It's a sacrifice for the parish that the school is tied to, as that parish commits no small amount of its resources toward running, improving and supporting the school. It's a sacrifice for parents who choose to work to come up with the money needed to pay the tuition. It's a sacrifice for the students who often are in a building that is not as nice as the public school options.

Catholic education always has been and always will be a sacrifice. The question is: is it one you are called to? I'd like to offer you a three- (possibly four-) step process to help you determine whether or not you and your family are called to be a part of a Catholic school.

First (and this is a shocker), you should pray. You personally should pray, and you and your spouse should pray. This prayer should, in my opinion, take the form of a simple question: "God, are you calling us to send our child (children) to a Catholic school?" I remember when I was in seminary, I spoke to a priest about some of my fears in regard to being a priest. I caught myself articulating what I thought was the core question, "Do I have what it takes to be a priest?" He said something in response to that which changed my life, "Of course you don't have what it takes to be a priest, but that is not the question. The question is 'Are you called to be a priest?'" I've never forgotten the abject power of that simple question. The same principle applies here: are you being called to send your child to a Catholic school? If so, put aside fears and worries and push forward.

A key part of the process of asking God that question is to listen for the answer. God may give it to you in the quiet of your heart (note: quiet time needed here!), he may give you the answer through the process of finding out if it's possible – who knows how? The key is this: ask the question and listen for the answer.

The next step is to evaluate. Look at your finances and see what you can do and what you can't. Please make sure and note that this is something for which you may be called to sacrifice "wants." My dad and mom always gave us kids the speech about making sure to separate "wants from needs." Look, too, at any special needs your child may have in order to present that information to the school later. Once you have this information ready, head on over to the local Catholic school and set up a time to ask questions and get a tour.

Getting to the school is the next step. Get a tour of the place. Ask your questions. Find out their Mass schedule. Inquire about Adoration and community service. If you know you'll be needing financial assistance, ask direct questions about that. If you know your child will need special programs, ask about that. See if they have a program where you can volunteer at the school (or parish) in exchange for tuition assistance.

I promise I'm telling you the truth: at almost every school I served in, I was shocked at the amount of tuition assistance dollars that went unclaimed. I don't know if it's pride, if it's a lack of publicity or there is somehow a lack of need, but I guarantee you that the school has donors who feel a positive debt toward their Catholic school and want to help others get the blessing of Catholic education that they experienced. Be sure and check this out.

If, after that, you don't feel you have the information you need, you can do a next step and ask to meet with the pastor. Walk him through your decision process thus far and see if he can't pray with you and show you resources/possibilities that the school didn't know about or share with you.

If, in the end, you do these things and come to the conclusion that you cannot "do" Catholic school, what are your choices?

Religious education. Every parish has a Catholic education program: a place where kids are formed in their faith, usually on Sunday or some other day. Be sure and check that out. The reason we have these programs is because some people are simply not called to Catholic school and this is a beautiful way to experience the joy of growing in our faith. Your parish more than likely has a youth group, check that out and see if it doesn't help you

To be honest, it's hard for me not to use this article to tell you how much I loved and love the experience of being in a Catholic school as a priest. It regularly blows me away to be around employees at the school and parents who scrape and sacrifice so that the kids can grow in love and knowledge of Jesus and the world our Father made. I could write a whole article just about that. You know, as I think about it, I might just do that. Keep watching this space to find out. Enjoy another day in God's presence!