

## Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

### Theological Underpinnings: *Catholic Schools and Protestant Schools*

By David Frew  
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*Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes.*

*In a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.*



*“When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me*

*Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.*

*And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me*

*Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.”*

*– The Beatles*

Reading Rev. Charles Brock's articles on mysticism has inspired me to try to "pick up" the intellectual content of the "On the Waterfront" series. To this end, I have decided to add some theological focus. And why not? My time at Maryvale Kindergarten, St. Andrew School, Cathedral Prep, and Gannon University exposed me to lots of in-depth religious education. After 17 years of Catholic education, who could possibly have a better understanding of theological matters?

We did not have formal classes in comparative religion. We were, however, helped to understand during the early grades, that there were two distinctly different religions: Catholic and Protestant. When we asked for details regarding the Protestant designation, we learned that it was a huge category, which broadly contained a lot of different if not all of the other religions. We also learned that we were fortunate to be learning the correct religion and that Protestants, in all of their various forms, were being misinformed -- that they had originally all been Catholics but had been duped into changing at one time or another.

Several of us kids walked by St. Luke Lutheran Church at Seventh and Cascade on the way to school, so we asked about our friends who attended there. They were neighborhood friends and after learning that they were "misguided Protestants" we worried about them, theologically. One of the kids had family friends who were Jewish and asked about them. They were Protestants too, we learned. And like other misguided religions, they were originally Catholics, as well. It was all very confusing. Confusing but simple. We were all either Catholics or Protestants.

In a spirit of constant concern for our neighborhood friends we continued to inquire about their religious well-being. Unfortunately, we were told, they were attending a Protestant (not public) school where they would never be exposed to the "true religion." When we asked what that meant we began to learn the nuances of life after death. About heaven and hell. Hell was explained in detail during one of the early grades. Sister instructed all of the kids in Grade 3 to use the thumb and first finger of their right hands to pinch the skin on their left hand.

"Does that hurt?" she asked. "Pinch harder," she urged. "Harder."

Class response among my 50 colleagues in bolted-down desks was mixed. Many of the boys had an "are you kidding me" look on their faces. With eyes rolling they applied only slight pressure. Meanwhile the girls, who always seemed to take matters of religion very seriously, were pinching hard enough to cause permanent tissue damage. Several were gasping and whimpering.

It was a very powerful experiential learning lesson. Even the boys were beginning to get the main idea. Then as Sister told us that we could stop pinching, she instructed Jimmy B, who always sat in the front row because he was a troublemaker, to begin counting to

one million. Aloud. Muffled sounds of counting began. “**13, 14, 15, 16.**” Meanwhile, Sister was carefully defining heaven and hell.

“In heaven there are puffy cumulous clouds, candy canes, sunshine, balloons, and perpetual parties with cake,” she told us. “Technically not perpetual, but infinite. Never ending.”

A noticeable hush enveloped the class as we began to contemplate the meaning of an infinite party. With cake. “**28, 29, 30, 31.**”

“Hell, on the other hand, was a place of terrible torment, pain, and fire,” Sister continued. “Hell fire! Pain Misery. And like heaven, it was also a place that went on forever. And once you got there you could never ever get out,” she added. “**57, 58, 59, 60.**”

“If you want to understand how terrible hell is,” she continued, “think about the pinch pain that you just experienced.”

“**83, 84, 85, 86.**” Jimmy B was faltering as he counted. He had never been this high before, and he was not exactly gifted at mathematics.

“How long do you think that it will take Jimmy to get to one million?” Sister asked. “Hours? Days? Weeks?”

We could not imagine, but as Jimmy B’s counting slowed, we began to understand that a million was a lot. And that was the moment when Sister chose to reveal the first great truth: The pain of hell is at least a million times worse than a big pinch!”

Suddenly we understood the difference between heaven and hell. It was a brilliant analogy for third-graders. We were obviously lucky to go to a Catholic rather than a Protestant school – to be able to learn the real truth.

Subsequent lessons motivated us to ask more questions about our hapless friends who were attending Protestant schools, namely Emerson, which was located at 10th and Cascade. “What will become of them?” we asked.

“Hopefully,” Sister answered, “they are invincibly ignorant.”

“What is that?” we asked.

“Innocent by virtue of not knowing,” she added.

“Should we tell them?” we asked.

That seemed to be a very difficult theological question. Sister agonized over it. It was clearly as intellectually challenging for her as some of our advance lessons on arithmetic (clearly not her favorite topic). Like the esoteric details of higher arithmetic, including long division and fractions. The issue of salvation for friends who were attending Protestant school was obviously a conundrum.

“As long as they remain invincibly ignorant,” she told us, “they can avoid hell. When they die they will be sent to Limbo. A place for babies who were never baptized and other poor souls who never learned the real truth. Those who did not get to go to Catholic school.”

“Limbo?” we asked. “No parties or cake, but no hell fires either. Limbo-ites would not have to endure the pain of one million times the hurt of a skin pinch. The trick seemed to be remaining invincibly ignorant.

“Perhaps you should not tell them,” Sister suggested.

“But then we won’t get to see them in heaven,” one of the girls complained.

That was when Sister revealed the second great truth: “Once you know the truth, you can never turn back,” she added. “If you tell them and they really know, they will no longer qualify for limbo. It will either be heaven or hell! And the same is true for all of you. You are lucky to go to Catholic school where you will learn the truth, but now that you know, you can never drift away. If you went to a Protestant school, or worse yet a Protestant church, you could be in serious trouble.”

Thus, the third great truth: “Stay away from neighborhood kids who go to Protestant schools. If you hang around with them, you will be asking for trouble. Big trouble. You will be gambling with your immortal souls!”

For several days after the lessons, Jimmy B was still counting. But he never even reached 1,000. We were really scared. During those simple days at St. Andrew School we kids tried to live our lives by the three great truths, as we reminded ourselves of how lucky we were to understand religion. Slowly we began to realize that our friends who attended Protestant schools were probably invincibly ignorant and lucky to be so.

A few of the intellectually curious kids tried to find out about Ralph Waldo Emerson, the person for whom the Protestant school was named. We were not surprised to learn that he was a “wacko liberal intellectual” who had odd beliefs about God. He was a transcendentalist (whatever that was) who read eastern philosophy. The more we learned about him the more we understood why our neighborhood friends, many of whom went to Emerson School, were invincibly ignorant. Emerson was obviously not a cool guy, like St. Andrew, who was a fisherman. We could relate to fishermen.



*Ralph Waldo Emerson was the perfect person to name a Protestant school after. He was an intellectual and Harvard graduate who often quoted the Bhagavad Gita.*

A few years ago, I met a sailor and fellow Yacht Club member who had also gone to St. Andrew School. He was a Bay Rat who had lived only a block from me. We shared our school experiences and learned that we had several of the same teachers, even though he was several years behind me in school. After several good laughs over old experiences, he revealed that he was a St. Andrew drop-out.

While sitting in Seventh Grade class one afternoon, he accidentally made a loud digestive noise. Such sounds almost always inspired the mirth of the boys and this particular one had been quite loud. After being unable to stop laughing, the teacher sent him to the Principal's office with a note, describing the nature of the heinous offense. St. Andrew was stuffed with kids in those days. There were two sections of each of eight grades with as many as 50 in each. The school had expanded by building what was called the "Little School," immediately west of the original building. The Little School was designed for young children with tiny desks, short water fountains, and accessories designed for first- and second-graders.

The job of Principal was huge. She had to cover two separate buildings with 12 oversized sections in the main school building. To make administrative matters even more difficult, she also taught Eighth Grade. Little wonder that she may have forgotten a few "details" from time to time.

Being "sent to the office" was never a good thing, and my friend reported that upon arrival he was instructed by the school secretary to sit quietly in the outer waiting room and wait. Eventually the Principal showed up and was briefed regarding the serious offense that had taken place. After mentally considering some options,

she instructed the young felon to kneel on the terrazzo floor in front of the large statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary that graced a corner of the outer office. He was instructed to kneel and pray to Mary for insights regarding what he had done wrong and how he could repent. It was 2 p.m.

He knelt and contemplated. Mostly he experienced terrible pain in his knees. Terrazzo floors are very hard. The clock ticked and 2:30 came. Then 3 p.m. Finally, a bell rang signaling the 3:20 dismissal. He continued to kneel. Noises in the hallway helped him to realize that school was over for the day and that everyone, including his Seventh-Grade classmates, had left for the day. Beads of perspiration dripped into his eyes. It was 3:30. His knees were screaming.

At 3:45, Lady Madonna revealed a spiritual insight. She told him to stand up. He rose slowly in front of the statue, barely able to feel his legs. When the secretary who had been guarding him saw what he was doing she issued a stern warning: "You had better kneel down again before the Principal returns," she barked.

It was almost 4 p.m. when he decided to ignore the secretary. He limped out of the office, staggered down the hall, exited the building, and headed home. As he departed, the secretary issued a final warning: "If you leave without permission, don't bother coming back."

He did not return. The next morning, after considering his options, he walked to Gridley Middle School, talked to Pat Cappabianca (the guidance counselor), and was assigned to a homeroom. He had officially become a Catholic School dropout.

The theological implications were profound for a seventh-grader. How would he tell his mother that he had switched to a Protestant school? Was it too late for him to become invincibly ignorant? Had he already gone too far? Could he possibly qualify for Limbo instead of Hell some day?

Probably not! In 2007, motivated by long-standing beliefs, Pope Benedict XVI, a respected theologian before being elevated to the position of Pope, instructed the church to terminate its teachings on Limbo. The afterlife home of the invincibly ignorant was officially closed.

Flash forward to the mid-1970s. I had published a series of articles about the positive impact of meditation on work productivity and job satisfaction and was running a speaker's series at Gannon. One of the featured guests was Fr. Basil Pennington, a Trappist Monk from New England who was touring with a new book about Christian meditation. I had just introduced Fr. Pennington and returned to my lecture hall seat when a woman in a neat business suit hurried down the aisle and sat next to me. She looked at me, and said, "You don't have any idea who I am, do you?" She was correct. I had no idea.

As it turned out, it was Sr. Virginella, retired principal from St. Andrew School. Happily, I did not blurt out “I thought you would be dead by now,” which was exactly what I was thinking.

Apparently, she, like many of her Sister of St. Joseph teaching colleagues, had engaged in programs of trying to look and act much older than they were. Instead of being 60 or 70 as we imagined her to have been at the time, she was probably only 35 or 40. We had a very nice conversation that day.

These days I continue to be amazed by the work those 1950s sisters accomplished. They were terribly young by contemporary standards. Many were “cadet teachers” with a year or less of college training. They were young women who were inspired to contribute to Catholic education, often because of their own educational exposures. Somehow the women stepped into classrooms filled with 40 to 60 irritating students like myself and “held court” from 8:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m., teaching every subject and stopping only at lunch when they also had to supervise hundreds of crazy kids, clamoring for a meal.

Did those simple theological lessons from the 1950s help us or harm us?

The Beatles must have known when they wrote “Let it Be.”

Photos:

Statue: <http://blog.discountcatholicproducts.com/author/megan/>

Ralph Waldo Emerson: <https://studyofreligion.fas.harvard.edu/history-committee-study-religion>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.*

