

Schools for Ordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

In the weeks of mid-autumn, when colors fill the trees and crisp air fills the evenings, advertisements for high schools and colleges fill the pages of diocesan newspapers as 8th graders and 12th graders – and their families – try to select the place they will call home for the next four years.

These decisions can have a profound impact, as it is through school that so many of us meet our best friends, find wise mentors, discover our passions, and explore new cities – or our own hometowns. It is in school that we take some of our earliest risks, learn about the fields that may become our life's work, and navigate the successes and failures that characterize this span of life. In the scheme of most lifetimes, 4 years is a small percentage; yet, in the scheme of life itself, the school years have an importance that their briefness belies.

So, when looking at schools and weighing options, there are many factors to consider. Advertisements for schools are filled with information about special programs, academic highlights, reputation, athletic success, extracurricular opportunities, study abroad, scholarships, graduation rates, placement rates, national rankings and alumni success stories.

All of this is important and well worth exploring. In the pre-internet days of my own school choices, I remember pouring over school catalogs with great interest, visiting open houses, receiving brochures in the mail, and discussing these decisions with those whose opinions were likely wiser than my own.

However, as important as it is to do all of this, I would suggest one other thing. Be wary about viewing schools as a tunnel through which you will pass to get to what your future holds. Think of them equally as often as the place in which you will live four years of your ordinary times. Because of that, ask yourself some ordinary questions at the same time you ask about the bigger picture:

- When you look at the school's website and brochures, what has pride of place? The alumni, faculty and students whose achievements are profiled will tell you what the school values as success. Does it match what you believe success should be?
- When you visit a school, read faces. Do students and staff (those not responsible for impressing you on your campus visit!) greet you with the warmth and attention of neighbors, or is everyone absorbed in a cell phone

screen or an air of detached indifference? In the cafeteria, scan the room. Are there many who sit alone or is there the buzz of those glad to be with each other?

- Look carefully at amenities. Certainly, new facilities and modern buildings are important. Yet, in our world of great need, is luxury overemphasized? Are the people who fill those facilities and buildings talked about with equal enthusiasm as bricks and mortar?
- Will the schools you are considering afford you the opportunity to grow spiritually at the same time you grow in intellect and strength? Will you be supported in these important years when your faith can grow in new and exciting ways—or falter when life throws challenges your way? If the school is a religious school, is that commitment taken seriously so that your faith will be strengthened, sacraments will be readily available, and the public practice of faith is cherished? If the school is a public or secular private school, will the importance of your faith be respected or mocked?
- Are the youngest of students and the most junior of staff spoken to and about with the same amount of dignity and respect as the school's principal or president?
- Can you get a sense of how this community will care for you in a time of crisis? If something difficult confronts you or your family during the time you are there, will there be people and places at this school to see you through with love and hope?
- Look at bulletin boards! This old fashioned low-tech way to share information can tell you a lot about what ordinary times look like. Do not look simply to see whether there is a range of activities that might interest you, but ask whether postings are respectful and kind. Do they reflect a community willing to speak about difficult issues? Do they demonstrate an interest in beauty, truth and good?

My parents, and later I, picked schools together many times. Each place I lived and studied was important to me – although none as important as the place where, as a teacher, I have now spent several decades of my life. The schools you pick will come to mean a good deal to you – for better or worse. So, look for the big things – but also look

for those little, intangible details. They will give you the clues to what school will be like in ordinary times.

PS: As you search for your schools, don't forget to pray for wisdom and guidance. And ... I'll be praying for you too!

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