

MONDAY GUEST

Her High Expectations

Principal at Inner-City Catholic School Talks About Her Struggle

Sister Marie Michael Jacobs runs a tight ship at St. Andrew's Elementary School.

For nearly two decades, this persistent, aggressive and warm-hearted nun has headed a "inner city" grade school in the shadow of downtown. From the very start, she has kept the doors open to people of all backgrounds.

Sister Marie Michael is a product of the civil-rights movement of the 1960s. She saw then the importance of "keeping God's Kingdom open" to all children.

Under her watchful eye, St. Andrew's has excelled academically, made sure to involve parents in the education of their children and turned out, year after year, students who are learned in the ways of the world.

Press Religion Editor Chris Meehan's two sons attend St. Andrew's. He knows first-hand what this strict but loving principal has achieved.



Press Photo by LANCE WYNN

Sister Marie Michael Jacobs wants "to involve people of all races and cultures in this school."

Q: What was St. Andrew's like when you arrived in the early 1960s?

A: I'd taught a good dozen years at other schools before coming to St. Andrews. When I came here, it was a typical inner-city school with problems in curriculum and behavior. The big thing, from the start, was to develop a program and acquire a staff. And even from the start, we established a close working relationship with the parents. They are the key to our success here at St. Andrews. But the first three to five years were very, very difficult.

Q: Why is that?

A: The parish school was going down. We needed to bring people back. We needed to work with the people who lived nearby, as well as with those who lived outside our parish. Even from the start, I had an idea of a school unlike any other in the area — a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-religious grade school.

Q: Can you describe, then, what you tried to accomplish at this school, once you arrived?

A: First, I tried to develop a well-rounded program to meet the needs of every individual child. But before that, I wanted the school itself to have a cheery, warm and happy atmosphere. I wanted a respectful environment in which children can learn. We think now a spiritual atmosphere permeates the building.

Q: What was the school like when you came, what problems did it face?

A: Well, we had fights around here — switchblades, chains. The

school itself was in an old, depressing building, constructed in the 1880s. So, to fulfill our philosophy, we had to give a considerable amount of time and effort to provide an atmosphere for learning that was so essential. We had to put in carpet, walls, paint the building, get new windows. Back then, we shared the school with high school students from Catholic Central. I remember we used church basement at St. Andrew's for classes. When I arrived, we cut the size of classes, made the school brighter, more attractive to the individual students. I worked with minority parents who told me they didn't care if the teachers were black, white, red or yellow as long as they responded to the students.

Q: Did you come here with an educational philosophy, an approach?

A: Yes, I wanted to involve people of all races and cultures in this school. I wanted us to be open to the whole community. From the start, we put much emphasis on the formation of attitudes, on consideration and respect for others. We didn't just sit back and work out a philosophy in one afternoon, though. We've done in-depth evaluation as we've gone along. Our philosophy has been revised three or four times, although we've always hung on to the idea of total education for the child. Also part of our philosophy is to work closely with parents. We communicate to them the importance of being co-educators. It is not uncommon to find parents in the building most days of the week, working on some project or another. And this makes all the difference in the world. Just knowing they are around says a lot to the kiddos.

Q: Education, then, is more than

just teaching the basics of writing, reading and arithmetic?

A: Certainly, we teach our children the basics. But we do, yes, try to do more than that. We try to train youngsters for the real world. We are committed to total education of the whole child. Catholic parents will get at St. Andrews what they would get at any other Catholic school, plus a special atmosphere animated by the Christian spirit of love, freedom and truth in which a younger can attain his or her potential. We try to help them develop a realistic self concept. And we do this with help from the parents, with help from the whole family. We want parents to feel that this is their school, to have a sense of ownership. The parents are involved here. They are part of the team.

Q: How is St. Andrew's different from other Catholic schools?

A: We are probably more ecumenical in some ways. We teach Catholic doctrine, but we don't isolate it to Catholic doctrine. We talk about other religions. We expose children to other viewpoints. We've had Jewish children, Muslims, Buddhists, Protestants and those who don't consider themselves religious.

Q: What is the best part of the job for you?

A: I take pleasure in seeing the successes of our students, not just in careers but in the families they have established, in how they are as parents. I get chills looking at our students. They're so beautiful. They really are. They reflect the principles and values we've worked so hard to implement. I feel so much that the presence of God in these children, in the goodness that exists among these youngsters. That's why I've stayed on at this school during a time when so many of the other sisters have gone out to other apostolates. I feel so much of that the redemption of Kingdom is to be done in the schools. I can't see myself anyplace else.

Q: How do you keep students in line at St. Andrews?

A: We have a positive discipline here, high standards and high expectations. Behavior here is based on consideration and respect for others. Students are as free as they can be responsible. They are challenged, must work hard, but we try to show them we care for them. We try to develop self-discipline. We don't do this in regimented, militaristic ways. We try to be as positive as possible. We feel there is a time and place for everything, for work and for play.

Q: Had you always wanted to

work in a central city school such as St. Andrews'?

A: Not really. My education never prepared me for this, but I began to become aware of other people's needs in the '60s. I felt pulled to this type of school. Before coming, I lived for eight weeks on the south side of Chicago, in the heart of gangland. I realized then that I just hadn't known much about whole segments of our population. I tried to make up for the lack in my background at that time. It was a complete turnaround for me. That experience gave me an eye for what the needs were in schools such as St. Andrews.