

Catholic Schools: Heritage and Legacy

1990

Since the time of the [Second Vatican] Council, . . . the Catholic school has had a clear identity, not only as a presence of the Church in society, but . . . as a genuine and proper instrument of the Church. It is a place of evangelization, of authentic apostolate and of pastoral action – not through complementary or parallel or extracurricular activity, but of its very nature: its work of educating the Christian person.¹

Introduction

Twenty-five years ago, the Second Vatican Council described the distinctive characteristics of Catholic School and their essential place in the Church's apostolate of education.² In 1988, the Congregation for Catholic Education encouraged local churches across the world "to examine whether or not the words of the Council have become a reality". The Congregation urged that "[this] reflection. . .lead to concrete decisions about what can and should be done to make Catholic schools more effective in meeting the expectations of the Church".³

Accordingly, we, the Bishops of the Latin and Eastern Catholic Dioceses of Ohio, take this opportunity to reaffirm our deep commitment to Catholic schools and to reflect with our people upon the accomplishments of the past, the challenges of the present, and an agenda for action as we approach the twenty-first century.

Catholic Schools – A Heritage of Accomplishments

A century ago, Catholic schools educated children of immigrant peoples struggling to establish themselves within the mainstream of life in the United States. The schools helped them to succeed. In 1990, Catholic schools prepare the descendants of those immigrants and others for positions of responsibility within the mainstream of life in the United States, and for leadership, grounded in and motivated by their faith, to effect a more just society.

Catholic schools in the United States have educated hundreds of thousands of children and young adults and educated them well. At the same time, Catholic schools have been instruments for evangelization of young people and their families. Now, as then, Catholic schools form an evangelizing and educating partnership with parents who are "primarily and principally responsible for the education of their children".⁴

¹ The Congregation for Catholic Education, The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School, Washington, D.C., United States Catholic Conference, 1988, para. 33.

² Vatican Council II, Gravissimum Educationis, 1965, #5

³ The Religious Dimension, para. 1.

⁴ Gravissimum Educationis, #3.

At the heart of the Catholic school's existence is the school's ability to help form a people of faith and to hand on the Catholic tradition. Catholic schools are "the most effective means available to the Church for the education of children and young people".⁵ With great consistency, studies of United States Catholics have evidenced strong correlations between the religious attitudes and behaviors of Catholic adults and the number of years they spent in Catholic schools. Adults who studied eight or more years in Catholic schools were more actively involved in their Church and gave to it more generously. They were more apt to be hopeful people, trusting and tolerant of others, benign in their images of God, aware of the complexity of moral decision making, supportive of the equality of women, and willing to see sex as sacramental. No other educational effort of the Church has been able to show these results.⁶ Recently, researchers at the Search Institute in Minneapolis examined national data for information on the social and religious values of high school seniors. They found that seniors in Catholic high schools expressed more positive social attitudes and values than other pupils studied. Catholic school seniors were less militaristic in their approach to resolving conflict and less materialistic in their outlook on life. They expressed greater racial acceptance, greater concern for others, greater willingness to participate in community affairs and to volunteer their time, more support for marriage and monogamy as a lifestyle, and they valued more highly the importance of "making a difference in society."⁷

Recent studies also document the academic vitality and influence of Catholic schools. In 1982, University of Chicago sociologist James Coleman and his associates released the first major analysis of High School and Beyond, the federal government's longitudinal study of American secondary schools.⁸ Coleman's research, refined and expanded in 1987, reported the outstanding academic performance of Catholic school students. Students who spent their sophomore through senior years in Catholic schools showed exceptional growth in verbal skills and mathematics. Catholic schools had high records of attendance, low dropout rates, and orderly, disciplined school environments. These results, Coleman pointed out, could be explained in large measure by the functional community surrounding and reinforcing the Catholic school.⁹ According to Coleman, the religiously grounded community, which connects families to one another and to the school through the Church, constitutes the Catholic school's greatest capital asset.¹⁰

Research shows that the Catholic school makes its strongest academic impact on disadvantaged students. Students who are most disadvantaged by the circumstances of their lives – those handicapped by poverty, low personal self-esteem, poor histories of academic achievement, relegation to the fringes of the school community, disciplinary problems, and homes where

⁵ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, To Teach as Jesus Did, Washington, D.C., United States Catholic Conference, 1972, #118 and Teach Them, Washington, D.C. United States Catholic Conference, 1976, #8.

⁶ Andrew Greeley, "Catholic Schools: A Golden Twilight?" America, 11, February, 1989.

⁷ Peter L. Benson, Michael J. Donahue, and Michael J. Guerra, "The Good News Gets Better", Momentum, November, 1989.

⁸ James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared, New York, Basic Books, 1982.

⁹ James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities, New York, Basic Books, 1987.

¹⁰ James S. Coleman, "Schools and Communities". Chicago Studies, November 1989

parents have had little formal schooling – are the very students most likely to benefit academically from a Catholic high school education.¹¹

Realities That Call Us To Action

Ohio lost over fifty Catholic schools during the last ten years. While enrollment in Catholic schools has declined more slowly than the state's overall school-aged population, the combined effect of fewer students and higher expenses has driven tuition to levels which are prohibitive for many families. Shifting populations have left behind aging, half-empty school buildings, often in economically depressed urban and rural areas. Meanwhile, Catholics in burgeoning suburban areas have been reluctant or unable to undertake the long-term financial commitment required to build new schools. Added to these pressures has been the strain on Church resources created by our increased communal awareness of critical human and social needs. Multiple ministries now stretch the limits of staff, funds, and space once marshalled almost exclusively behind Catholic schools.

These realities challenge us to renewed commitment to our schools and call us to a new agenda.

An Agenda For The Twenty First Century

For over a hundred years, Catholic schools have been an enduring and reliable resource of the Catholic Church in the United States. In fact, they have been even more important to us in times of unrest within the Church than they have been during periods of relative stability.¹² In the turbulent quarter century since the Second Vatican Council, the direct positive relationship between years spent in Catholic schools and adult religious practices – such as attendance at Mass, involvement in parish life, attitude toward vocation, and belief in life after death – actually increased.¹³ Those now conscious of their baptismal commitment and conscientious in their willingness to minister to the needs of others are, to a great extent, persons who were formed and educated in Catholic schools.

To enter fully and responsibly into the complex concerns confronting us at this point in our history, the Church needs all of its resources, particularly the resource of Catholic schools. In a previous age, Catholic schools formed and protected the faith of immigrant children against the tyrannies of religious bigotry and second class citizenship. In the present age, Catholic schools nurture the faith of a people who will encounter new tyrannies: people who will be moral in the face of demeaned values; people who will be mindful of their Creator in an era of technological idolatry; people who will speak out with compassion to oppose the inhuman atrocities committed against their brothers and sisters across the globe; people who will be a voice of conscience in a nation prone to political expedience and too often indifferent to social and economic injustice; and people who will be faithful stewards of this planet amidst ecological squander and sufficient capability to incinerate the earth.

To confront these new tyrannies, we call upon parents, pastors, principals, and teachers to renew their commitment to the quality of faith formation and academic preparation which characterize the tradition of the Catholic school. Shifting demographic patterns will require changes in the

¹¹ Andrew Greeley, Minority Students in Catholic High Schools, New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Books, 1982

¹² Andrew Greeley, American Catholic Since the Council, New York, Thomas More Press, 1985, p. 134.

¹³ Andrew Greeley, American Catholics Since the Council, pp. 134-135.

way some schools are organized and administered, but we must assure that Catholic schools are available for those who choose them. Catholic schools must remain among the poor, especially in disadvantaged urban and rural areas where they have been shown to make the greatest difference. They must remain available to middle class and affluent Catholics. Finally, if they are to remain available, Catholic schools must be supported – vocally, financially, politically, and personally, by the entire Catholic community.

Service To The Poor

In many inner cities and in many rural communities, Catholic parishes are anchors in their neighborhoods. Their presence says that even after city dwellers move to suburban homes, businesses relocate, storefronts are boarded up, and social services shutdown, the Church does not abandon its people.

We wish to find ways to continue our schools where they service the poor. Our tradition and our faith demand that we show preferential love for those who are less fortunate. Our service to the poor is based upon their dignity as human beings and upon our responsibility to live in solidarity with our brothers and sisters of the human family. By educating children of the poor, Catholic schools help families break the cycle of poverty and give those families a future. Through Catholic schools, the Church helped marginated immigrants, whatever their ethnic origin, to move to the center of American society. In Catholic schools, especially of the inner cities and rural communities, we strive to continue this tradition.

Restructuring For Demographic Change

There are areas of the State where the numbers of families and children are insufficient to support a Catholic school. More and more, movement of the population will require that the Church consider closing or merging schools. More and more, parishes, even those presently without schools, will need to come together to support a single interparochial or regional Catholic school. In these cases, each participating parish must see itself as integral to the life of the school and share responsibility for addressing students' pastoral and sacramental needs, directing the school's academic program, and sustaining the school's financial base. Restructuring will call for bold, innovative thinking and cooperative planning by diocesan and parish leadership, diocesan departments of education, and local school administrators. Restructuring must be done in a way that ensures continued Church presence, allows for involvement of those whom the schools serve, and responds to those whose jobs are affected. In other areas of the State, the growing number of families challenges the Church to examine possibilities for opening new schools to educate future generations.

Interdependence And Legislative Action

By working interdependently and by appealing to persons who hold public office, those who have supported the education of students in Catholic schools have accomplished much; still, we have more to accomplish.

Last year, in Ohio, more than 84 million dollars of state support – approximately 470 dollars for each young person in our schools – were directed in various ways to Catholic school students. Most of this assistance was provided in the form of textbooks, instructional materials, and supplemental services. Investing tax dollars in the education of children attending Catholic schools pays significant dividends to all Ohio citizens. That investment helps to support the education of young men and women who eventually will assume responsibility for their

communities, state, nation, and world. Furthermore, that investment affords Ohio citizens considerable tax savings. By educating children in Catholic schools, parents of Ohio's Catholic school children saved Ohio taxpayers over six hundred million dollars of instructional costs in 1989/90 alone.

We need to build upon this base of state support. We wish to work within legislative channels in Ohio to secure additional services and materials so that the dual burdens of tuition and taxes our parents carry can be mitigated. As we renew our efforts, we hope to inspire our fellow bishops across the United States to mobilize energies at the national level. Together, we must pursue constitutionally acceptable means to provide a just distribution of tax dollars so that all parents may exercise realistically their right of choice in the education of their children.

Working Together

Catholic schools need the advocacy of pastors, parish staff, parish leaders and total parish membership.

As all ministries in the Church, Catholic schools depend upon the vocal and active support of Church leaders. Parish leaders must be unequivocal about the school's religious purposes in service to the community. The school must be a vital part of total parish life.

As bishops, we wish to express our gratitude to the dedicated and competent teachers and administrators who make Catholic schools possible. We depend upon their continued commitment. Here also changing patterns call for a renewed spirit and a new agenda. Fifteen years ago, more than one-third of the teachers in Ohio's Catholic schools were members of religious communities. Today, less than 14 percent of the full-time teachers in Ohio's Catholic schools are diocesan priests or members of religious communities. With decreases in vocations to religious communities, with aging of those communities, and with religious brothers and sisters serving in a variety of new ministries within the Church, our schools will be staffed primarily and increasingly by lay teachers and administrators. We will continue to strive to compensate teachers and administrators with salaries that make their ongoing service to our schools a possibility.

The Need For New Resources

To keep pace academically, to restructure, to build, and to compensate teachers and administrators adequately, we must find new resources for our schools. Tuition, especially for Catholic high schools, is a significant reason for declines in enrollment. Catholic schools must be available for all families and not just for the wealthy. Development efforts on the diocesan, parish, and school levels are increasing. But the real key to financial stability lies in the generosity of the entire Catholic community. No longer are we a fragmented immigrant Church. Our people are in the mainstream of American society and the national economy. According to a recent Gallup poll, Catholics are the most prosperous of religious denominations. Yet, by the same poll, Catholics, as a group, give a significantly lower percentage of their income to the Church. Finances may not be the problem. A lack of conviction might be, and, if so, the Catholic community must find within itself the will to support the many ministries of our Church.

Like other ministries, Catholic schools are part of the mission of the Church. They are not the exclusive obligation of parents who have children in them. To pass on the faith and the traditions of our Church is a responsibility of all of us who count ourselves as Catholic:

The obligation to sustain the Church's institutions – education and health care, social services agencies, religious education programs, care of the elderly, youth ministry, and the like – falls on all the members of the community because of their baptism; the obligation is not just on users or those who staff them.¹⁴

Conclusion

We recall that a young Church, growing rapidly because of the arrival of our European ancestors a century ago, found the will and the dedication to build, out of their poverty, the Catholic schools of the United States. We celebrate that accomplishment. We are energized by the history of our schools.

The challenges our schools face now will require of us, as of our ancestors, sacrifice, competence, and determination. We are confident that, working together in faith, and with God's help, we can make wise decisions for the future. Our schools are a heritage. We must make sure they remain a legacy for future generations.

Bishops of Ohio

Most Rev. Daniel E. Pilarczyk
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Most Rev. Nicholas T. Elko
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Most Rev. James H. Garland

¹⁴¹⁴ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All, Washington, D.C., United States Catholic Conference, 1986, #347.

Auxiliary Bishop of Cincinnati

Most Rev. Anthony M. Pilla
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Most Rev. Gilbert I. Sheldon
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Most Rev. A. Edward Pevec
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Most Rev. A. James Quinn
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Most Rev. James A. Griffin
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Most Rev. Andrew Pataki
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Most Rev. Albert H. Ottenweller
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Most Rev. James R. Hoffman
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