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The Catholic Schools We Need

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When St. Paul describes the gifts God has given the church, he includes teaching among the most important (1 Cor 12:28). No surprise there. “Go teach!” was the final mandate of Jesus. History has long taught that without teachers to announce the Gospel and educate the young, the church struggles to survive. Evangelization through good teaching is essential to Catholic life. Pastoral leaders in developing nations say that Catholic education is what attracts people to Jesus and his church. When it comes to education, nobody has a better track

record than the church.

In the 20th century, for example, there was no greater witness to the effectiveness of Catholic schools than the Nazi and Communist efforts to destroy them. Pope Benedict XVI’s own beloved homeland—where to be Bavarian was to be Catholic—was perhaps hardest hit in all of Germany. By January 1939 nearly 10,000 German Catholic schools had been closed or taken over by the Nazi Party. Tyrants know and fear the true strength of a Catholic education: what parents begin in the home, Catholic schools extend to society at large.

But what of today’s Catholic schools that exist in a world largely free of those sorts of 20th-century threats? Are we not facing our own crisis of closure for the Catholic school in America?

The answer is yes. Statistics from the National Catholic Educational Association tell a sobering tale about Catholic schools in the United States. From a student enrollment in the mid-1960s of more than 5.2 million in nearly 13,000 elementary and secondary Catholic schools across America, there are now only half as many, with just 7,000 schools and 2.1 million students enrolled.

The reasons for the decline are familiar: the steady drop in vocations to the religious teaching orders who were the greatest single work force in the church’s modern period; the drastic shift in demographics of the late-20th century that saw a dramatic drop-off in Catholic immigration from Europe; the rising cost of living since the late 1970s that forced nearly every American parent to become a wage-earner and put Catholic education beyond their budget; and the crumbling of an intact neighborhood-based Catholic culture that depended upon the parochial school as its foundation.

The most crippling reason, however, may rest in an enormous shift in the thinking of many American Catholics, namely, that the responsibility for Catholic schools belongs only to the parents of the students who attend them, not to the entire church. Nowadays, Catholics often see a Catholic education as a consumer product, reserved to those who can afford it. The result is predictable: Catholics as a whole in the United States have for some time disowned their school system, excusing themselves as individuals, parishes or dioceses from any further involvement with a Catholic school simply because their own children are not enrolled there, or their parish does not have its own school.

Widespread Benefits

The truth is that the entire parish, the whole diocese and the universal church benefit from Catholic schools in ways that keep communities strong. So all Catholics have a duty to support them. Reawakening a sense of common ownership of Catholic schools may be the biggest challenge the church faces in any revitalization effort ahead. Thus, we Catholics need to ask ourselves a risky question: Who needs Catholic schools, anyway?

The answer: We all do. Much of the research on Catholic education conducted over the last five decades—from the Rev. Andrew Greeley to the University of Notre Dame; from the National Opinion Research Center to the work of independent, often non-Catholic scholars—has answered with a unanimous voice that without a doubt Catholic schools are an unquestioned success in every way: spiritually, academically and communally. More to the point, the graduates they produce emerge as lifelong practitioners of their faith. These Catholic graduates have been, are and will be our leaders in church and society.

Consider:

- The academic strength of Catholic schools is unassailable. Researchers like Helen Marks, in her essay “Perspectives on Catholic Schools” in Mark Berends’s *Handbook of Research on School Choice* (2009), have found that when learning in a Catholic school is done in an environment replete with moral values and the practice of faith, its test scores and achievements outstrip public school counterparts.
- Updating the work of John Coleman in the early 1980s, Professor Berends also estimates that two factors—the influence of Catholic values and the fostering of Catholic faith and morals—are the single biggest supports for the success of many young people, Catholic or not, educated in inner-city Catholic schools.
- Sociologists like Father Greeley, in his book *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church* (1976), and Mary Gautier, in her more recent article “Does Catholic Education Make a Difference?” (*National Catholic Reporter*, 9/30/05), have found that graduates of Catholic schools are notably different from Catholic children not in parochial schools in four important areas: 1) fidelity to Sunday Mass and a keener sense of prayer; 2) maintaining pro-life attitudes, especially on the pivotal topic of abortion; 3) the personal consideration of a religious vocation and 4) continued support for the local church and community, both financially and through service projects, for the balance of their adult lives.
- Catholic school graduates make good citizens, deeply committed to social justice, the care of the poor and the planet, proud volunteers in the church and in community. The widespread institution of service program requirements in Catholic schools over the last two decades has helped to create an entire generation of generous, socially minded alumni ready to help, no matter the need.

More could be written, of course, about how Catholic schools continue to excel in so many ways, helping to form citizens who are unabashedly believers in the way they live out what is most noble in our American identity. The few points listed above are potent reminders of the many long-term effects that Catholic schools have on the formation of their students. As both history has shown and researchers have documented, there are plenty of reasons for all American Catholics to take proud ownership of Catholic schools.

Reviving Catholic Schools

Not only should the reasons behind changes in attitude toward Catholic schools give us pause, but also the consequences of letting this school system decline. If Catholic education promotes lifelong commitment to faith and virtue, a high sense of social justice, greater numbers of religious vocations and an embrace of a way of life based on responsible stewardship, then will not its continued decline risk further erosion in all of these areas? Catholic history can answer this clearly.

In New York, for example, a nagging concern from the 19th century is re-emerging at the start of the 21st. My predecessor, Archbishop John Hughes—famously known as Dagger John for his fearsome wit and readiness to fight for Catholic rights—struggled to rid the New York public schools in the 1840s of their anti-Catholic bias. He was convinced, after watching immigrant families fight discrimination, that “the days had come, and the place, in which the school is more necessary than the church” (from James Burns’s *A History of Catholic Education in the United States*, emphasis added). Quite a statement—one echoed by several of his brother bishops, including a saint, John Neuman, bishop of Philadelphia, and the scholar and reformer John Lancaster Spalding of Peoria, who said that “without parish schools, there is no hope that the Church will be able to maintain itself in America” (see David Sweeney’s *The Life of John Lancaster Spalding*). These men understood that until Catholic schools were up and running, Catholic life would be stagnant. They made the establishment of Catholic schools their priority, and, thank God, most other American bishops followed their example. In 1956, for instance, my own parish in Ballwin, Mo., built its school even before its church, and I am sure glad they did, because that year I entered first grade to begin the most formative eight years of my life.

Given the aggressive secularization of American culture, could it be that Catholics are looking at the same consequences that met those 19th-century prelates? Today’s anti-Catholicism hardly derives from that narrow 19th-century Protestantism, intent on preserving its own cultural and political hold. Those battles are long settled. Instead, the Catholic Church is now confronted by a new secularization asserting that a person of faith can hardly be expected to be a tolerant and enlightened American. Religion, in this view, is only a personal hobby, with no implications for public life. Under this new scheme, to take one’s faith seriously and bring it to the public square somehow implies being un-American. To combat this notion, an equally energetic evangelization—with Catholic schools at its center—is all the more necessary.

The 21st-century version of the Hughes predicament, which tried to establish Catholic rights in the face of a then anti-Catholic America, would seem to suggest that without Catholic schools the church in the United States is growing less Catholic, less engaged with culture and less capable of transforming American life with the Gospel message. As long as we Catholics refuse to acknowledge that the overall health of the church in the United States is vitally linked not only to the survival but the revival of the Catholic school, we are likely to miss the enormous opportunity this present moment extends.

It is time to recover our nerve and promote our schools for the 21st century. The current hospice mentality—watching our schools slowly die—must give way to a renewed confidence. American Catholic schools need to be unabashedly proud of their proven gritty ability to transmit faith and values to all their students, particularly welcoming the immigrant and the disadvantaged, whose hope for success lies in an education that makes them responsible citizens. This is especially true for the Catholic Hispanics in the country, whose children account for a mere 4 percent of the Catholic school population. Failure to include the expanding Hispanic population in Catholic education would be a huge generational mistake.

To re-grow the Catholic school system, today’s efforts need to be rooted in the long-term financial security that comes from institutional commitment through endowments, foundations and stable funding sources and also from every parish supporting a Catholic school, even if it is not “their own.” Catholic education is a communal, ecclesial duty, not just for parents of schoolchildren or for parishes blessed to have their own school. Surely American Catholics have sufficient wealth and imagination to accomplish this.

It is both heartening and challenging to remember that Catholic churches and schools were originally built on the small donations of immigrants who sacrificed nickels, dimes and dollars to make their children Catholics who are both well educated and fully American. Have we Catholics lost our nerve, the dare and dream that drove our ancestors in the faith, who built a Catholic school system that is the envy of the world?

We cannot succumb to the petty turf wars that pit Catholic schools against religious education programs and other parish ministries. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that the church is all about both/and, not either/or. Strong Catholic schools strengthen all other programs of evangelization, service, catechesis and sanctification. The entire church suffers when Catholic schools disappear.

As the Most Rev. Roger J. Foys, Bishop of Covington, has said: "While there may be alternatives to Catholic education, there are no substitutes."

[Read responses to Archbishop Dolan's article from parents, scholars and educators.](#)

Most Rev. Timothy M. Dolan, archbishop of New York, has just released "Pathways to Excellence," a new course of long-term planning for Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of New York.