ARTICLES

FROM DOUBT TO AFFIRMATION: REFLECTIONS ON THE RECENT HISTORY OF CATHOLIC PAROCHIAL EDUCATION

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The author of a new history of parochial schools reviews the soul-searching that gripped Catholic education in the 1980s and shows how doubt and anxiety forced Catholic educators to face a simple but vital fact of life: As long as there are parents, pastors, and teachers interested in parochial education, these schools will survive and thrive. Even though American Catholic parochial education will never again attain the position of influence it had in the middle of the 20th century, parish schools will remain important education laboratories for the coming century.

As a historian of Catholic schools, I have come to expect questions on the *legacy* of Catholic education (Walch, 1996). But to my surprise, the Catholic educators with whom I have talked recently are only interested in the past as it relates to the future. They seem to have the same question: "Has the soul searching that dominated Catholic education during the past 15 years provided any lessons for the new century?" A tough question, especially for a historian, but let me try to respond.

Recent studies by a brigade of social scientists underscore the fact that Catholic schools are at a new peak academically and spiritually. Students in parish schools outperform their friends in public schools on virtually all standardized tests and even President Clinton has taken notice!

In large part the renewed popularity of Catholic education is the result of the unwavering commitment to the basics by Catholic educators. After decades of experimentation, public educators have come to the realization that there is no substitute for mastering basic literacy and mathematical skills. Just as important, educators across the nation have concluded that

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value-based instruction is a vital part of a complete educational experience. And no group knows more about basic skills and moral values than Catholic school teachers.

Yet as recently as ten years ago, it was not clear that "back to the basics" would be the path to the future. There was a lot of anguish and finger pointing back in the 1980s. Catholic newspapers and magazines were alive with conflict and controversy.

And it was the entire Church that was criticized. "When you get down to it," concluded one beleaguered school principal, "it really becomes a question of priorities. What would you do if you didn't spend money on schools? Spend the money on yet another program? Buy new stained glass windows? What could you spend the money on that would prove more effective?" (McGurn, 1982). These tough questions often were met with embarrassed silence, or worse, indifference.

Parents in particular were the focus of a lot of the criticism. Catholic school advocates were tired of the old complaints about the cost of parish schools or the limited quality of the facilities and programs of parish schools. These were smoke screens as far as Catholic educators were concerned. "I am tired of hearing the melodramatic cries about the cost of Catholic education," noted Sr. Mary Ann Walsh in a January 1983 issue of *Our Sunday Visitor*. "Whether a parent chooses Catholic school education reflects less on his financial system and more on his value system. People pay for what they want" (Walsh, 1983, p. 72). This theme was repeated in story after story in the Catholic press.

But Catholic parents were not the sole target for blame. A number of commentators attributed much of the decline in Catholic schools to a change in priorities within the American Church establishment. "The maintenance of Catholic culture among traditionally identified American Catholics, while still important, and even the chief function of many a parish, is no longer the prime issue it once was," noted David O'Rourke (1983, p. 76). "A dozen years ago, the Catholic bishops devoted a significant part of their annual meeting to the question of federal funds for Catholic schools. Today the schools are almost a minor issue. The focus is on armaments and social order" (O'Rourke, 1983, p. 76).

O'Rourke and other commentators saw this change in priorities as a root cause of the malaise that had overcome the laity in regard to parochial schools. If the bishops were no longer concerned about parish schools, why should parents care? Many bishops saw the shift away from the schools to the more relevant issues of war, peace, and economics as a form of Church renewal.

Few of these leaders, however, saw the downside to this renewal. "Sadly, it is this renewal that is the root of the alienation of the people from the Church," added O'Rourke (1983, p. 78). "The experience of conversion and

commitment that is common on the leadership level of the Church is simply not part of the experience of many Catholic people. After having seen the Church changed under their feet without even having been asked about it, they now see it walk away from them, leaving them behind" (p. 78). In short, the people in the pews were not sure anymore what it meant to be a Catholic, let alone if they should support Catholic schools.

And even parents whose faith in parochial education never waned could not shake their concern about catechesis in the classroom. Was it enough for Catholic schools to teach a value-based curriculum? Were Catholic educators doing enough to insure that their students had specifically Catholic values? Although there was a lot of disagreement over the content and the approach to religious instruction, everyone—liberal and conservative, parent and educator—could agree that the current program was less than perfect.

But confusion reigned when progressive and traditional Catholics talked about specific changes in Catholic school religious instruction. Responding to the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on war and peace, progressive educators pushed for a religious education that centered on issues of war and peace, social justice, and the environment. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, one of the authors of the peace pastoral, urged Catholic educators to seize the day. Those who heard Bernardin speak at the meeting in Washington were impressed. "The movement is fledgling in the schools," noted one educator. "What we are endeavoring to do is to make [social issues] central [in the curriculum] and the bishops' pastoral letter will give it a big impetus" (Herbert, 1983).

Other educators sought specific ways to incorporate the peace pastoral into the Catholic school curriculum. "The Challenge of Peace: A Call to Educators" was a conference that brought together 300 people from 28 states and several foreign countries to develop strategies for presenting the complicated document to children. "'Though the pastoral must necessarily be presented in different ways for pupils of different ages,' noted one educator, 'even children in the elementary grades will learn about it.' Conference participants fortified themselves with workshops and prayer and prepared themselves for the school year about to start in a few weeks" (Finn, 1983, p. 12).

Not surprisingly, traditionalists were little concerned about incorporating the peace pastoral into the Catholic school curriculum. They were more concerned about the general decline in the quality and quantity of religious instruction. "It is my opinion that today's Catholic school students are receiving a watered down version of Church doctrine and there are many parents who agree with me," wrote Jerry Becan in *America* (1983, p. 12).

In fact, the term "religious illiteracy" popped up in the Catholic press throughout 1983 and after. What concerned Becan and other traditionalists was that "the immediate result is that today's Catholic education does not foster the firm commitment to the faith that students in previous generations

had. The long term result will be that Catholic school graduates will drift away from their church" (Becan, 1983, p. 12). It was a chilling thought for devout Catholic parents who sacrificed to send their children to parish schools.

Everyone in the Catholic community seemed to agree that change was needed, but no one was quite sure what was to be done to improve the Church's "religious literacy quotient." In fact, religious educators took to heart the federal government's 1983 report on public education entitled *A Nation At Risk*. For Catholic educators, it was denomination at risk. Thus it was no surprise that Francis D. Kelly, the executive director of the NCEA religious education department, recommended specific changes in the religious education curriculum.

Kelly recommended a curriculum and a program that would extend over 12 years to prevent the mistakes of "too much too soon or too little too late" (1983, p. 187). He called for those responsible for teacher training to redouble their efforts to insure that their teachers know precisely what content they are responsible for transmitting. Kelly further encouraged the direct involvement of parents in the catechetical process and he called for teachers to do more testing of students' knowledge of religious content. Finally, Kelly concluded, "religious teachers and catechists should be more courageous and enterprising in challenging their students to deepen their intellectual understanding of the faith" (1983, p. 187). It was an ambitious program, but also a vital one. "Meeting this challenge," Kelly added, "will determine in good measure the degree to which we will have intelligent, articulate Catholics capable of being effective witnesses and evangelizers in the church of the next millennium" (Kelly, 1983, p. 188).

In spite of all these challenges, many Catholic parents remained deeply committed to their parish schools. Whatever problems these institutions had, parents were attracted to the religious environment of parish schools. Throughout the decade, Catholic parents would repeat their point over and over again. "'Religion is more caught than taught,' noted one principal. 'This should be an operating principle in any Catholic school. Religion and spirituality are to be lived and not relegated to the academic time period during which religion is taught.' Parents, whatever their overt complaints, seemed to understand this point" (Emswiler, 1983, p. 38).

These parents also agreed that a large part of the environment was determined by teachers. The typical Catholic school teacher was a young unmarried woman with a deep commitment to her Catholic faith. She was paid a sum that few considered adequate—as little as half the salary of public school teachers in the same area. Not surprisingly, the attrition rate among teachers was very high. It seemed that no one—not even the most dedicated teachers—could afford to make a career of teaching in parish schools (Ryan, 1983).

This point was underscored by a casual comment made by a Chicago social scientist who regularly studied the Catholic schools. In an interview in *U.S. Catholic*, William McCready of the National Opinion Research Center referred to parish school teachers as a "religious order." "These young people had the same dedication and commitment to the schools that the nuns of an earlier era had. The difference was that they didn't envision that as their life forever" (McCready, 1983, p. 22). It was a mild shock to many Catholic parents to think that the young women teaching their children were taking virtual vows of poverty when they signed their teaching contracts.

Yet year after year these dedicated young women entered the parish school classroom. "Rugged dedication" was the term used by one journalist to describe this phenomenon. "Nuns they are not; dedicated they are," wrote Barbara Mahany (1984, p. 30). "A burning commitment to Catholic education, regardless of pay, seems to be stoking the vocations of lay teachers around the country" (p. 30). The teachers themselves also described their work in terms often used for religious vocations. "It's a feeling of just total dedication," concluded one second-grade teacher, "not to the school, but to the children. I feel like it is a religious calling" (p. 30).

But parish school administrators could not count on an endless supply of these selfless women willing to work for minimum wages. Many in the Catholic school establishment were concerned. "Although most teachers interviewed said they were willing to put up with low pay and heavy extracurricular loads," noted Mahany, "saying intangibles more than made up for the shortage of cash, all sadly told tales of colleagues who dropped off the Catholic school payrolls when the money squeeze became a strangle"(1984, p. 34). Everyone agreed that lay teachers were the strength of parish schools and that more had to be done to retain these wonderful people. But where would the money come from and how should the schools be reformed? These were unresolved questions throughout the 1980s (Castelli, 1984; Manno, 1984).

It was a decade of uncertainty, but out of that uncertainty came a new identity. Once a haven of white immigrant children making the transition from Europe to America, the Catholic schools of the 1980s had become visible symbols of the commitment of some parents—both Catholic and non-Catholic—to the education of their children. To be sure, many Catholic parishes had closed their schools and other parishes were unwilling to open new schools. But just as important were the many parishes in the inner cities as well as in the affluent suburbs that made great sacrifices to sustain their schools. As Andrew Greeley and others had articulated in the Catholic press, the future of Catholic education rested on the foundation of parental commitment (Greeley, 1989).

The first half of the 1990s has included years of speculation on many aspects of American life and culture. Certainly the future of American

Catholic parochial education has been discussed generally and specifically in the thousands of parochial schools across the nation. With enrollment on the increase over the past four years, most Catholic educators are cautiously predicting a bright future for Catholic schools.

Not surprisingly, the effectiveness of Catholic schools has been discussed as part of the ongoing discussion of public school reform, education vouchers, and charter schools. Essays in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and other national publications stimulated public discussion and praise for parochial education in 1996 (Arenson, 1996; Carlson, 1996; Stern, 1996; Woodward, 1996).

The two presidential candidates, state and local politicians, and scores of commentators also weighed in with their own views. Bill Clinton argued for "charter schools"—public schools that would emulate Catholic schools in every way except catechesis. Bob Dole championed "education vouchers" to lighten the financial burden of parents who wanted to send their children to private or religious schools (Broder, 1996; Hardin, 1996).

Clinton's victory has put an end to the voucher movement for the time being, but the charter school movement is still very much alive. It is interesting to note in passing that Clinton is the only president to have had the "privilege" (his word) of attending a Catholic school!

It is a sad state of affairs, therefore, that just when parish schools are doing so well in some communities, they continue to struggle to survive in other places. At the very time Catholic school graduates are being celebrated for outperforming their public school counterparts, noted Peter Daly in the *Washington Post*, the Catholic school itself is disappearing (Daly, 1991).

The salient question is why are some Catholic schools closing if they are doing such a good job? The answer is complex, intertangled with changing social values, changes in family structure, and the rising cost of private education relative to other living expenses. All of these factors contributed to the decline over the past 30 years, and all of these factors will continue to affect parochial schools in the next century.

A major factor that continues to affect parish schools is the changing structure of the American family. Where once the typical American Catholic family consisted of two parents and a gaggle of kids, the American Catholic family of the 1990s is often a single parent with one or two children. Even in two-parent households, both parents work and are in need of day-care facilities and after-school programs. In short, Catholic families no longer have the time or energy to contribute to the operation and maintenance of a private parish school.

Related to the change in the structure of the typical Catholic family over the past 30 years is a correlated change in American values. "We as a nation," notes William J. Byron, former president of the Catholic University of America, "are now more than ever possessed by our possessions. Wisdom

leads the list of casualties in a conflict of values where greed, promoted by popular culture, is on the rise and sacrifice, proclaimed as a value by the Catholic tradition, is on the decline" (1990, p. 489).

In such an environment, with so many social pressures to buy a bigger house, another car, a video cassette recorder, or a personal computer, Catholic parents find that they have no money left to pay parochial school tuition, let alone the resources needed to build a new school.

But the most powerful reason that Catholic parents do not support parish schools in the manner of their parents and grandparents is that there is no pressure to do so. "There is nothing like the presence of an external enemy," adds Father Byron, "to solidify a community in shared identity and mutual support. Catholics are more comfortable ... in the United States today. They are less rigid about their religious practice..." (1990, p. 490). Their grandparents and parents saw parish schools as a form of protection and security for their children against a frequently hostile American society. In an increasingly pluralistic, ecumenical world, discrimination against Catholics has become a distant memory.

When Catholic leaders first established parish schools—especially in the century between 1830 and 1930—their stated goal was to serve both their Faith and their nation. "The fact is," noted David J. O'Brien more than 30 years ago, "that the hierarchy, clergy, and the laity, all wished to be both American and Catholic and their attempt to reconcile the two, to mediate between religious and social roles, lies at the heart of the American experience" (1966, pp. 308-309). By all accounts and measures, parish schools did an extraordinary job of meeting those stated goals.

But if these goals have been met, will there be a continuing need for parish schools in the next century? Public education is no longer a threat to Catholic children. Catholics as a group have blended into American society without the loss of their religious faith. Indeed, recent studies by the Educational Testing Service indicate that out-of-school religious education programs do an effective job—almost as effective as parish school programs—of passing on the Faith (Sommerfeld, 1994). It is not clear to many Catholics why they should put an increasing percentage of their resources into institutions that have already fulfilled their stated goals.

Catholic educators respond that these schools should be supported precisely because they have been so effective in meeting those stated goals. Stated simply, Catholic schools are now and will continue to be a model and an alternative to public education. Where Catholic schools had once followed every innovation introduced in public education, the roles have been reversed. Catholic schools are now laboratories for the development of effective tools in reaching a broad cross section of children.

What can public education learn from parish schools? In *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter

Holland (1993) outlined the successful hallmarks of Catholic education, hallmarks that could be adopted by public schools. In fact, these are the very hallmarks that President Clinton has articulated for his charter school movement.

Foremost among the qualities of parish-based education is decentralization. To be sure, all parochial schools are nominally controlled by superintendents and diocesan boards of education. But for the most part, parish schools are administered at the local level. Funding for the schools comes from the community and teachers are hired by principals without interference. Parents have a greater involvement and effectiveness in the education process because they are working with a single institution in their neighborhood rather than a faceless bureaucracy downtown.

A second quality related to the first is the fact that parents, students, and faculty share a broad set of beliefs that gives each school a moral purpose. Achieving this unanimity in a public institution may not be easy. But if our nation's motto means anything, then public institutions must do more to achieve "one out of many." Shared values are possible if parents, students, and faculty care about education.

This care is also reflected in a shared code of conduct that stresses human dignity and the belief that human reason can discern ethical truth (Steinfels, 1994). This code need not be religious, but neither can it be arbitrary. More important, the case must stress a good greater than individual achievement or gratification. "It is difficult to envision," wrote the authors of *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, "how unleashing self-interest becomes a compelling force toward human caring" (McDonald, 1993, p. 8).

Another hallmark of parochial schools worthy of emulation is size. The small size of most parish schools promotes interaction between students, parents, and staff. Because teachers serve in many different roles during the school day—disciplinarians, counselors, and friends as well as specialists in one or more academic disciplines—they become mentors and role models. The small size of most parish schools insures that parents and teachers know one another and their children well. In short, small size facilitates communication.

Finally, parish schools place a special emphasis on academics. Small size and limited resources necessarily require administrators to concentrate on basics. The result is a student body well grounded in the mathematical and literary skills so necessary for success at future educational levels. Large schools with cafeteria-style curricula may very well meet short-term demands for relevant instruction, but there is little evidence that courses in industrial management and family living are as valuable as literacy and mathematical skills in a constantly changing society.

The question remains: Did the soul searching of the 1980s better prepare Catholic education to survive in the next century? I think so. The recent history of Catholic education makes it clear that the future of Catholic parochial

education will be determined by the parents and teachers of the children who are educated in these schools. And Catholic parents and teachers learned a lot about themselves and their schools through this decade of soul-searching.

More than two centuries ago the parents and pastor of St. Mary's parish in Philadelphia established the first parochial school in this country. And as long as there are parents, pastors, and teachers interested in parochial education, these schools will survive and thrive. Even though American Catholic parochial education will never again attain the position of influence it had in the mid-20th century, parish schools will remain important education laboratories for the coming century. This is a valuable piece of information that comes as the result of many years of doubt and struggle.

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