

When the Sisters Said Farewell: The Transition of Leadership in Catholic Elementary Schools

Michael P. Caruso, S.J.

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In *When the Sisters Said Farewell: The Transition of Leadership in Catholic Elementary Schools*, Michael P. Caruso, S.J., illuminates what is too often only a statistical footnote in the history of American Catholic schools—the decline in the number of religious sisters teaching in Catholic elementary schools in the latter half of the 20th century. The demographic data given at the outset of the book is well known, but impersonal. In 1965 there were 104,314 teaching sisters in 113,446 Catholic elementary schools in the United States. In 2011, there were 4,977 teaching sisters in 5,848 schools. Far fewer people have heard the engaging and poignant stories of the sisters who taught in and eventually had to say goodbye to Catholic parish schools where they or their religious communities had taught for years. In this book, Caruso presents the words and insights of women who lived the experience as the last vowed religious teachers and principals in some of these Catholic elementary schools. It is a relevant history for current Catholic school principals, teachers, and advocates.

For those with a memory of teaching sisters in Catholic schools and who may recall sisters quietly leaving schools they themselves or their religious communities had staffed for a generation or more, this book humanizes what might have seemed an overly calculated transition process. These readers will likely find themselves putting faces to the largely anonymous stories and quotations from women of various religious communities. For those with little to no memory of religious sisters in schools, the text chronicles the development of the schools, the sisters' integral role in their operations, and some factors related to their decline in numbers along with their stories of transitioning out of parish school communities. In short, Caruso's book captures the human stories

that parallel the growth and decline of teaching sisters and the transition to lay leadership in Catholic elementary schools.

Current questions of Catholic school mission, identity, and viability are not explicitly addressed, but they underlie foundational premises for the book and many retrospectives on Catholic schools. Specifically, the teaching sisters brought something distinctively Catholic to education. This is true, but it is inaccurate to conclude that Catholic schools are not “Catholic” if they do not have a sister as principal or a faculty predominated by sisters. It would be better to accurately understand the history of Catholic schools, including the role of teaching sisters, in order to strengthen schools in their mission today. This history includes the seemingly “halcyon” decades after World War II through the early 1970s that are romanticized in works like *Nunsense* or a John R. Powers novel. However, that part of the history needs to be de-mythologized and understood for what it was. It included many new schools and opportunities for ministry; it also included significant hardships as the sisters who made it all possible often worked for subsistence wages in sub-optimal conditions, frequently with incomplete professional training. For example, one sister recounts a single slice of bologna for dinner for days on end; another tells of the cold and draughty living conditions; a third, when principal, would warn her teachers as soon as she could whenever the religious community’s educational supervisor was spotted in the parking lot on one of her surprise visits. Without the clear-sighted understanding provided in the book, the Church’s school ministry becomes viewed through a lens distorted by misconceptions of religious sisters, Catholic schools, and Catholicism in general before Vatican II.

The history continues after Vatican II when Catholics and parish school leaders worked to interpret and implement the mandates of the council while addressing cultural shifts that influenced the American Catholic Church. These changes in the Church and the culture at large directly impacted religious sisters and Catholic schools. Most obviously, the number of religious sisters available to teach declined, causing religious communities to leave Catholic school ministry. Many parishes were forced to examine the viability of their schools. Some schools made the transition to lay leadership and faculties at significantly higher costs, while others were consolidated or closed altogether. Caruso shares the difficulties of these transitions for the religious sisters, the lay principals and teachers who carried on the ministry of Catholic school education, and the parishes who not only lost a significant human resource but also a symbol of dedication and service to the Church.

To keep the narrative moving Caruso does not spend much time explaining

the culture of Catholic schools and their recent history, rather relying on the readers' understanding or their willingness to infer the basics from the narrative he shares. The shortcomings of the book emerge when the sisters make their exit from the story. Today, most Catholic elementary schools no longer have religious sisters leading or teaching in them, and so when the story transitions to current lay leadership, some of the energy in the narrative dissipates. The current reality of new initiatives for Catholic schools, advice for communities that are going through a transition with their schools, and knowledge and dispositions for Catholic school leaders are all important but not as interesting or as well presented as the stories told by the sisters.

Caruso's book is at its best when it uses the sisters' own words to share their experience of living and teaching in parish communities, as well as their explanations of the process and emotions behind withdrawing from individual parishes. One sister tells of their withdrawal from a parish: "The parish was notified (through the grapevine) and formally through the parish bulletin. Parishioners and children were devastated...There really was no preparation for this transition." Another sister recalls leaving a different school: "one of the hardest aspects of this time was that the sisters were all grieving and dealing with their own feelings, but we tried to minister to everyone's grief" (p. 84-85). As the sisters tell it, they often had to enact decisions made by others in response to vocational and financial trends far beyond their control, while helping a confused, sad, and angry parish community adjust to them leaving. On one hand, they were expected to support and maintain conformity with official directives, on the other, they felt a very real sense of loss and grief in the withdrawal. Throughout, there is enough data to illustrate the points, but the heart of the book is the stories of the religious sisters who experienced individual events that collectively constituted the trend of the sisters withdrawing from Catholic elementary school education.

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