

potent value of religious dimension in the films themselves and that the latter will discover a religious, sacramental presence in this influential medium. And *Afterimage* just may enable readers to see cinema with a keener eye for the sacred within the mundane and muddled mystery of life's reflection on the silver screen.

*Sorin Engelland-Spohn teaches English and religion at Saint Mary's College High School, Berkeley, CA.*

## **BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

ROBERT D. PUTNAM, SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2000

*Reviewed by Melissa Harraka*

Never before has the health of American democracy been measured by pizza and beer sales at bowling alleys. Yet through his portrayal of community and civic engagement in America, Robert Putnam reveals a startling tendency in American life that makes such measurement worthwhile and, in fact, necessary. Putnam's work, *Bowling Alone*, revolves around the notion of social capital and the degree to which its value has changed in American society, particularly during the past 5 decades. The trend is very clearly a downward one, as illustrated by declining rates of participation in some of America's most well-known organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, parent-teacher associations, and even local bowling leagues. Simply stated, today's Americans are showing much less interest in engaging with their fellow citizens over political, social, or religious causes. We are accepting and extending fewer and fewer invitations to join formal and casual communities, indicating that social capital is no longer a valued commodity in our country. Even family dinners in our households have declined at a rate of 33% over the past 25 years (see [www.bowlingalone.com](http://www.bowlingalone.com)). Putnam's findings uncover not only a new perspective on connectedness in America, but moreover, a threat to the success of our democratic ideals. Ironically, the national community, which is the only community with which many Americans identify, might rapidly lose its identity if Putnam's studies and conclusions are not heeded.

*Bowling Alone* is structured around four main objectives. The first is to explore the trend in civic engagement across a variety of frameworks and to relate this trend to social capital. Putnam uses data on voter turnout for government elections, attendance at PTA meetings, church attendance, and

membership in professional organizations like the American Medical Association among other research to create a comprehensive picture of disengagement in America. In addition, Putnam points to the last 3 decades as a period of particularly significant deterioration in civic commitment.

During the last third of the twentieth century formal membership in organizations in general has edged downward by perhaps 10-20 percent. More important, active involvement in clubs and other voluntary associations has collapsed at an astonishing rate, more than halving most indexes of participation within barely a few decades. (p. 63)

Putnam broadens the impact of these statistics by relating them to social capital, which like other forms of capital, gives way to tools and assets that can positively affect the "productivity of individuals and groups" (p. 19). Because social capital "calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations" (p. 19), the thinning of social and civic networks bodes poorly for social capital and all of its consequential civic benefits. This concept anchors the book throughout.

In the next segment of *Bowling Alone*, Putnam considers possible explanations for the weakening of so many community networks. He acknowledges the movement of women into the labor force and the mobility of American individuals and families as moderate factors in the crumbling of civic involvement. The far more significant culprits in isolating Americans from one another, according to Putnam, are those stemming from technology and mass media, specifically television.

Considered in combination with a score of other factors that predict social participation (including education, generation, gender, region, size of hometown, work obligations, marriage, children, income, financial worries, religiosity, race, geographic mobility, commuting time, homeownership, and more), dependence on television for entertainment is not merely a significant predictor of civic disengagement. It is the single most consistent predictor that I have discovered. (p. 231)

While Putnam is careful enough to distinguish correlation from causation, he also successfully draws upon other studies of communities conducted just before and after television was introduced. He is thus able to argue a strong likelihood that television watching is the overwhelming cause of national civic disengagement. The academic-minded Putnam concedes that evidence is not fully conclusive, but his ensuing chapters indicate that it is not why social capital has ailed that concerns Putnam, but rather why social capital must be nursed back to health.

Catholic educators are generally well accustomed to the language of part-



nership and community in their school cultures. However, the goal of building capital in the Catholic school setting hardly ever refers to capital of the social nature. Yet Putnam's chapter on education and children's welfare purports that social capital is a much needed asset in the Catholic educational venture of developing children into upstanding, contributing citizens. In fact, Putnam contends that social capital is just as influential in nurturing children as the socioeconomic and demographic factors they may face. Even the level of informal social capital, which develops through casual friendships and their outlets (dinner parties, block parties, etc.), is shown to be a strong predictor of student achievement. "Level of social trust in a state and the frequency with which people connected informally with one another (in card games, visiting with friends, and the like) were even more closely correlated with educational performance" (p. 300).

Educators would tend to affirm Putnam's guesses as to why this correlation is true, having experienced firsthand the benefits of things like parent involvement. Putnam singles out Catholic schools for their marked ability to instill academic success and supports Coleman's hypothesis that it is Catholic schools' community-based culture that ensures student success. However, he makes it clear that Catholic schools are not immune to the ills plaguing social capital, remarking that the "'functional communities' from which Catholic school students benefit have been eroding, because both the church and the family have lost strength and cohesion" (p. 303).

For Catholic school teachers and administrators who profess their commitment to children's welfare, Putnam's words must not be taken lightly. Putnam himself would consider such dismissal of precipitating social climate a failure of his book. *Bowling Alone* is not just Putnam's conferral of a poor grade in "plays well with others" on the American report card. He explicitly offers hope and suggestion—in his words, an agenda—for America to recover its once exalted civic traditions and rediscover its community bonds. Putnam's optimism in a resurgence of community is perhaps no more obvious than in his concluding suggestions that the elements of our society that have actually thus far posed sizeable threats to social capital can be put to use as social capital generators. In fact, Putnam's website, [www.bowlingalone.com](http://www.bowlingalone.com), and its companion, [www.bettertogether.org](http://www.bettertogether.org), are models of just how roadblocks to social capital can be reconfigured into channels for valuable civic interaction.

Alexis de Tocqueville once commented, "Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America" (p. 48). If there is anything that should distract our attention from this most important topic, it is Putnam's *Bowling Alone*.

*Melissa Harraka is a sixth-grade teacher and technology coordinator at St. Jude the Apostle School, Atlanta, GA.*

Copyright of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice* is the property of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.