

Ministering to Catholics

A Look at Catholic Schools

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In Gerry's first class on ministering to Catholics, he opened with the following: "We cannot discuss how to spiritually help Catholics apart from understanding the Catholic Church. While this class is focused on serving Catholic people more than a study of Catholic faith, the reality is that Catholics of all types are affected in their thinking by their experience with Catholicism. This experience has come down from the past and has surrounded Catholics with many extra-biblical practices and have formed and shaped their religious experience. Most of these practices have led to more confusion than help in understanding the Lord as He has revealed Himself in the Scriptures. Observing how Catholics have been affected by these practices and the actions of their leaders will help us communicate God's truth more clearly."

My objective for today is to provide a brief history as to how and why Catholic schools came into being. We will then talk about their burgeoning growth, followed by a just as significant decline. We will look at various possible reasons for the decline, including reliance on tradition and lack of complete teaching from the Bible and how what we are looking at might help us in ministering to Catholics. Though Catholic schools worldwide (as of information from 2011) experienced an educational boom (primary schools increased from 86,505 to 93,315 from 1997 to 2008, and enrollment increased 20% over the same period), the same cannot be said about what is happening in the United States. That is where our focus will be.

History of Catholic Schools

The history of Catholic schools in the United States is actually older than the United States itself. The first Catholic school was established by Franciscan missionaries (from Spain and France) in 1606 in what is now St Augustine, Florida. The purpose of the schools was the protection of the Catholic faith. The number of Catholic schools remained small; there was basically a smattering of schools established during the next century. What they did find during this time was that the English colonists had begun establishing their own public schools, often with a heavily Protestant, if not blatantly, anti-Catholic view. It was not until after the American Revolution that a significant number of Catholic schools began to appear.

In 1782, St. Mary's School opened in Philadelphia. It is considered to be the first parochial school in the United States. The first Catholic college to take root was Georgetown (Washington, D.C.) in 1789. The First Amendment (religious freedom) under the Bill of Rights (1791) helped Catholics in their efforts to establish schools. The 1800s saw a significant increase in demand for and availability of Catholic

schools, fueled by a large influx of Catholic immigrants, especially from Ireland in addition to increased interest from an overall growing Catholic population. The availability of Catholic schools increased as schools were often supported by public fund. Funds were received by schools in New York, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Connecticut, and New Jersey. This period also saw the establishment of more prominent colleges: Fordham University in New York in 1841, University of Notre Dame (South Bend, Indiana) in 1842, and Catholic University of America in 1887. It is the one and only national university of the Catholic Church in the United States (D.C.). The attitude of Catholics towards public schools was reflected in a quote from minister and philosopher Dr. O.A. Brownston: "We deny, of course, as Catholics, the right of the civil government to educate, for education is a function of the spiritual society....It (the state) may found and endow schools and pay the teachers, but it cannot dictate or interfere with the education or discipline of the schools."

Catholics considered the public schools to not only be a threat to Catholics, but according the 1917 Catholic Encyclopedia they were "an imminent danger to faith and morals", in general. In response to a need for conformity and unity between the various dioceses, American Bishops came together in what is known as the First, Second, and Third Plenary Councils (1852-1884). These councils strengthened the Catholic schools and the perception of the importance of a Catholic education by creating the parochial school system, which was and still is considered the strongest private school network in the United States.

More growth came as a result of the main decrees that came out of the Third Plenary Council. Among these were: 1) a mandate that pastors establish parochial schools for their parishes; 2) a command for Catholic parents to send their children to Catholic school unless they otherwise obtained permission from their local bishop; 3) a standardization of curriculum to be competitive with public schools, but also to ensure children received a consistent Catholic education (i.e., instruction of students 3 times a week for 6 weeks, to prepare them for their First Holy Communion); and 4) the acknowledgment that high school and college played a useful role in education (more importance to it), leading to further establishments.

The Growth and Decline of the Catholic School System

By the turn of the century (1900), there were an estimated 3,500 parochial schools and 100 high schools nationwide, with some 20,000 teachers and over 1 million students. By 1920, those numbers grew to 6,551 elementary schools with over 1.7 million students and 41,000 teachers. The number of high schools jumped to 1,500. The Baby Boom following WWII helped to fuel even more growth. By the mid 1960's Catholic Elementary schools enrollment had skyrocketed to 4.5 million students, with an approximately 1 million additional students in Catholic high schools (and 13,000 schools between the two). It is felt that the election of President John F. Kennedy (the first Catholic President) may have helped boost the numbers, as well. For those of you who attended a Catholic elementary school, you may have been a part of this 60's boom (I was).

However, this peak was short-lived. By 1990 (only 25 years later), the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) reported total enrollment (elementary and high school) was down to 2.5 million students and 8,719 schools (Mid 60's: 5.2 million / 13,000 schools) – a 45% decrease. The 1990s saw a slight increase in students (150,000) but a continued decrease in schools (573 lost). Fast forward to the 2016-17 school year and we see the following statistics from the NCEA:

Total Catholic school student enrollment for the current academic year is 1,878,824. This represents another 24% drop.

There are 6,429 Catholic schools: 5,224 elementary; 1,205 secondary.

Non-Catholic enrollment is 345,327, which is 18.4% of the total enrollment (overall).

In trying to paint a pretty picture of Catholic schools in the face of enrollment trends, an article entitled, “Catholic Schools in the USA”, by International Student says, *“Although enrollment has declined from its peak in the 1960s, Catholic schools in the United States continue to be a dominant part of the education system and at the dawn of the 21st century a new wave of international students has begun to add it distinctive character to the system. Catholics from abroad are coming to the United States to further their studies in disciplines as varied as English, Medicine, Business, and more. Thus it seems that Catholic education in America will continue to be international in nature as ever”*

International Student is an organization that brings international students to the U.S. at a college level. There is a question of what eventual impact these students will have on the Catholic school system.

Reasons for Enrollment Declines

Tuition: Cost is undoubtedly a significant factor in enrollment declines in Catholic schools. A June 2014 national study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) revealed that tuition costs were a problem for parents considering sending their children to Catholic school, as well as parents who did not enroll their children. The CARA study indicated that inflation adjusted annual tuition for Catholic Elementary schools increased 37% (from \$2,686 to \$3,673) from 2004 to 2013. Likewise, Catholic high schools had increased 82% (from \$5,289 to \$9,622) over that same period. Locally, the annual tuitions for Catholic Primary and Secondary schools are similar to the national averages.

Costs have risen dramatically over the decades due the need to rely on lay teachers as opposed to nuns, brothers, and priests (religious). The original scope of the Catholic schools was to provide education for all, including the poor. That objective was far more manageable when the bulk of the teachers were religious. Their vows of poverty resulted in a tremendous savings. However, the number of religious has dropped dramatically since the peak of the mid-1960s. Other surveys by CARA have concluded that the

number of nuns in the U.S. has dropped 74% from 1965 to 2016 (from 179,954 to 47,170). The number of priests dropped from 58,632 to 37,192 (37%), and brothers 66% (from 12,271 to 4,119).

Lay teachers are paid less than public school teachers, but are paid significantly more than religious. Factoring in other benefits (e.g., health, retirement) only increases costs, which must be passed down to the tuition rate. The probability of religious replenishing the teacher spots in the future is not promising. The CARA survey showed that only 15% of Millennial never-married females who attended either a Catholic elementary or high school have ever considered becoming a nun. For the never-married males who attended either school, only 26% considered becoming priests or brothers. NCEA statistics for the 2016-17 school year show Catholic school staff on the average is 97.4% Laity and 2.6% religious.

Parental Choice: An adult who attended Catholic primary or secondary school, but does not regularly attend mass, go to confession, or partake of the Eucharist may not value a Catholic education as much as a practicing Catholic. Various surveys show a lack of regular participation in the sacraments by those who identify as Catholic.

Data in the *Official Catholic Directory* shows that while the U.S. Catholic population has grown by 44% since 1965, Catholic marriages (couples married in the church) have decreased by 52% over the same period. If parents do not ascribe serious value in following the Catholic faith, will they be willing to pay for their children to attend a Catholic school? Marie Powell, Executive Director of Education, USCCB: “Fewer families participating in Catholic parish life affects their interest in choosing a Catholic school for their children.”

A change that may have led fewer parents to enroll their children in Catholic school can be seen in the revised Code of Canon Law of 1983 (reflecting changes brought about by Vatican II). Canon Law outlines the laws and principles used to regulate and direct the Catholic Church and schools. Under the 1917 Code, Catholic children were to be educated only in schools where religious and moral training (in the Catholic faith) occupied first place. Further, they were not to attend a school that has a mixture of Catholics and non-Catholics. A request for the latter required permission of the bishop of the diocese, who also outlined safeguards to prevent a loss of faith.

In the 1983 Code of Canon Law, Canon 798 says: “Parents are to entrust their children to those schools which provide a Catholic education. *If they are unable to do this, they are obliged to take care that suitable Catholic education is provided for their children outside the schools.*” This canon is further obscured by Canon 793: “Parents... are bound by the obligation and possess the right of educating their offspring. Catholic parents also have the duty and right of choosing those *means* and institutions through which they can provide more suitably for the Catholic education of their children, according to local circumstances.” These canons appear to present a large gray area that allows Catholic parents to circumvent the church’s desire that all Catholic children attend Catholic school.

An attitude problem present today may also play a part in the decline. According to the Congregation for Catholic Education (authorized by the Vatican), one of the difficulties facing Catholic schools are “pupils who shun effort, are incapable of self-sacrifice... who lack authentic models to guide them, often even in their own families. In an increasing number of instances, they are not only indifferent and non-practicing, but also totally lacking in religious or moral foundation.” There is “a profound apathy where ethical and religious formation is concerned, to the extent that what is in fact required of the Catholic school is a certificate of studies or, at the most, quality instruction and training for employment.”

Vatican II: Vatican II was held between 1962-1965. There had not been an ecumenical council (one to settle doctrinal issues) in almost 100 years. Pope John XXIII called the Council very soon after he was elected. He believed the Church needed to make the message of faith more relevant to people in the twentieth century. He called for an *Aggiornamento*, a “freshening of thinking and practices that would better enable the Church to do God's work and serve the whole people of God on earth. The pope also hoped the Council would pave the way for Christian unity. He did not have a fully formulated plan. Consequently there were many different hopes and expectations. What was issued from Vatican II caused concerns about the loss of Catholic identity and deficiencies in the teachings of the faith.”

Archbishop Daniel Buechlein of Indianapolis in a 1997 report stated there was “a consistent trend of doctrinal incompleteness and imprecision” in the catechetical (catechism) teachings, both in schools and education programs. Some of the points that Buechlein raised:

- There is insufficient attention to the Trinity and the Trinitarian structure of Catholic beliefs and teachings
- There is an obscured presentation of the centrality of Christ in salvation history and an insufficient emphasis on the divinity of Christ
- We have detected an insufficient recognition of the transforming effects of grace
- We have found an inadequate presentation of eschatology

It is possible that disenchantment with the Church, with its lack of consistent doctrinal views may well have made parents question the value of a Catholic education.

Urban Flight: As population moves to the suburban areas, urban schools suffer not only from a pool of fewer potential students, but those who remain may not be able to afford Catholic school tuition.

Charter Schools: These tuition-free schools provide an alternative to those parents who cannot, or do not want to, pay Catholic school tuition. They offer many of the same benefits as the Catholic schools (safe environment, emphasis on education and morals, etc.), sans the religious education.

Curriculum:

What sets Catholic schools apart from all others, according to the Catholic Church, is the religious education within their curriculum. ‘Religion Grade Standards’ for Catholic schools are outlined by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The religious studies for each elementary grade level (1st-8th) are separated into of 4 topics: Scripture/Christian Life, Sacraments/Worship, Morality/Social Justice, and Christian Faith and Practice.

The Scriptural emphasis of the curriculum focuses on the Gospels, primarily on the character of Jesus. The Sacrament portion focuses on preparation for First Confession (reconciliation) and First Communion (Eucharist) in grades 1 & 2. Through other years, it covers knowledge of the other sacraments, on-going participation in the Eucharist and Reconciliation and prayer, and learning about other aspects of worship within the Catholic faith including special feast days. The area of Morality/Social Justice for all intents and purposes covers how to live a better, more moral, life. Christian Faith and Practice is a gaining of further knowledge of the structure of the church, of Mary, and practices of other ‘holy people’ (saints, people of other traditions, e.g. Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr).

The overall emphasis is the living of a good, moral life, based on the example of Christ, and adherence to the sacraments, to establish a way of life and a belief system that will be perpetuated throughout their lives. What seems to be missing is the truth of being saved by grace, through faith alone, along with other key Christian truths (e.g., sin nature, security of salvation, Jesus as intercessor, judgment upon death). The religious studies at the High School level show essentially the same emphasis on living a good, moral life and the sacraments.

According to the chairman of the U.S. Bishop’s Committee on Catholic Education, Catholic schools are “the new centers of evangelism.” Catholic schools are welcoming non-Catholics as students. According to the NCEA, nationally, 20% of Catholic High School students are not Catholic. However, Paraclete boasts that 40% of the student body identifies as non-Catholics. The schools indicate they welcome non-Catholics to promote understanding of others, to exchange information on other religions, and because they share the same desire for an environment that exhibits high morals, values, and a building of character. They want to demonstrate to non-Catholics the love of God through their actions. But how does that differ from the many non-Catholics who are ‘good people’ in the world’s eyes? Where is the exposure to the truths of Scripture?

Although Paraclete states their emphasis is on Catholic teachings and traditions, they also state “learning through a Catholic perspective can deepen your understanding of your own religion as well as broaden your worldview.” The presence of a significant number of non-Catholics may impact the beliefs of the Catholics.

In this class, we have come to the understanding that Catholics believe they are saved by grace plus works. The curriculums emphasizing moral character, ethics and sacraments seem to support this. A quote from Bishop Robert Finn, head of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph: “Catholic schools exist to help parents in what is their most important

duty – to form holy children and to help them get to heaven.” We cannot form holy children, nor can we help them get to heaven.

In drawing our conclusion of the Catholic belief in works for salvation, here are some excerpts from “*The Catholic School*” by The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. These are principles for the schools to follow. These can be seen as good things, but they should come out as a response to a true faith, not a list of ‘must do’s’ to achieve your faith.

Section IV – The Educational Work of the Catholic School

33. His (Christ’s) revelation gives new meaning to life and helps man to direct his thought, action and will according to the Gospel, making the beatitudes his norm of life...principles of the Gospel in this manner become the educational norm since the school then has them as its internal motivation and final goal.” (Living out the Beatitudes is good, but in itself is not the goal.)

45. The Catholic school has as its specific duty the complete Christian formation of its pupils...The very pattern of the Christian life draws them to commit themselves to serve God in their brethren and to make the world a better place for man to live in.

47. Being aware that Baptism by itself does not make a Christian – living and acting in conformity with the Gospel is necessary (*faith – changed life is a result*) – the Catholic school tries to create within its walls a climate in which the pupil’s faith will gradually mature and enable him to assume the responsibility placed on him by Baptism.

49. The Catholic school is aware of the importance of the Gospel-teaching as transmitted through the Catholic Church. It is, indeed, the fundamental element in the educative process as it helps the pupil towards his conscious choice of living a responsible and coherent way of life.

Also related to curriculum, the Catholic Education Service (U.K.), in a position paper on Religious Education in Catholic Schools stated, “The Catholic Church...rejects the creationist interpretation of Genesis. The Catholic Church is clear that evolution is currently the best explanation of the origin and diversity of life on earth and that the earth is as old as current scientific orthodoxy suggests (approximately 4.54 billion years old).” This position was echoed in an evolution statement issued by the USCCB in 2004. Among its concluding remarks: “Assured that scientific truth and religious truth cannot be in conflict, *Catholic schools should continue teaching evolution as a scientific theory backed by convincing evidence.*” If they are rejecting the literal accounts of Genesis 1 & 2, what other parts of the Bible may they decide to reject? It may be that some of the current exodus from, or decision not to enroll in, a Catholic school may be the children of those parents who believe in the creation account and have lost confidence in the teaching of the Catholic church/schools as a result.

After School, then what?

With a curriculum so seemingly focused on morality, character, good works and obligatory sacraments, what happens when students leave the confines of the Catholic schools? A variety of surveys reveal a trend among those raised Catholic as they grow into adulthood.

The *National Catholic Reporter* stated that two-thirds of Americans raised Catholic no longer attends church. Half of these no longer call themselves Catholic, the other half are Cultural Catholics.

In an article titled, “New Stats on Why Young People Leave the Church”: the Public Religion Research Institute stated: “Young Catholics are leaving their faith at rates higher than almost any other religious group. 50% of Millennials (born 1982 or later) raised Catholic no longer identify as Catholic today. Only 7% of Millennials raised Catholic still actively practice their faith today.” Additionally, they estimated that 25% of Americans identify today as “none” (no religion) and 28% of them were raised Catholic.

In that same article, another survey listed the percentage of former Catholics who said the following reasons played a role in their leaving: 71% just drifted away from the religion; 65% stopped believing in the religion’s teachings; 43% said their spiritual needs were not being met; and 29% said they were unhappy with the teachings about the Bible.

OSV (Our Sunday Visitor) Newsweekly: About two-thirds or fewer Millennials who were raised Catholic remain Catholic as adults. A belief in this is that as more students do not attend Catholic schools, they are only exposed to science. With exposure only to science in the schools, there is the chance they will reject religion.

Pew Research Center: Found 52% of all U.S. adults raised Catholic have left the church at some point in their lives. A minority (11%) returned but the remaining 41% include 28% who are now ex-Catholics and 13% Cultural Catholics.

From a book titled, *Forming Intentional Disciples* (S. Weddell): Only 30% of Americans who were raised Catholic are still practicing (70% not).

While these statistics do not distinguish between Catholics who attended Catholic school and those who didn’t, they are still significant findings that indicate a deficiency of the Catholic Church in holding onto many who once identified as being Catholic.

Conclusion

While the increases in Catholic schools & enrollment of the 1800s through the 1960s were impressive, they were essentially a product of state funding, immigration, loyalty to traditions, and commands from the Catholic hierarchy. The period since the mid 60s has seen a dramatic decline. Though several reasons are given that seem to account for the decline, it seems a common basis exists among those who leave the Catholic faith after school: a lack of a true teaching and understanding of God’s word, a lack of knowledge that justification is of grace through faith alone, lack of a certainty of eternal salvation,

and the lack of knowing man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. The percentages discussed previously show that though Catholic primary and secondary schools seek to establish and perpetuate the beliefs and rituals of the Catholic faith to create lifetime Catholics, they lack the substance and meaning that only a true knowledge of the truths of Scripture can provide.

Two statements from an article, "Twenty-something Catholics: The lost generation (Millennials)?" sum up the problem nicely: 1) "The church's message isn't salient for them...They aren't getting a message worth getting out of bed for." 2) "New generations do not have a stake in the church and its future. And they are unlikely to make a commitment to something they do not enjoy." One other statistic that points to not only a lack of knowledge of Catholic principles, but also the trend to leave the faith as adults is seen in another survey done by CARA in 2012. In surveying teenagers ages 14-17 (who identified themselves as Catholics), only 18% said they attended Catholic school and church. Fourteen percent only attended Catholic school, 44% only church, and 24% neither. How strong / knowledgeable will they be in their faith? As with much else we have seen, how much of the tenets of Catholicism will they understand and will it be enough to keep them as practicing Catholics in the future?

As we are finding throughout the class, much of what many Catholics believe of their faith is based on what they are told, not what the Bible says. Having a better sense of the history, purposes, and teachings of Catholic schools may help us in our discussions with those who attended Catholic school in the past, those who currently have children attending Catholic school, or those who may not have attended Catholic school but still identify as being Catholic. Our hope is that God will bring them to a point of understanding and recognizing the true grace of God contained in His word, the truth of Jesus' complete atoning work on the cross.