

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OF NEW JERSEY

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: THE VISION IN OUR TIME

The New Jersey Catholic Bishops

THE MISSION

“The Lord answered me and said: Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets, so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses to fulfillment, and will not disappoint...”
Habakkuk 2:2-3

Two hundred years ago, on September 25, 1791, Congress adopted the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution – the Bill of Rights. Notable among the legal protections it affords individuals are those guaranteed by the First Amendment: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise.

The Ultimate Mission of the Church

In light of this freedom, as early as the late eighteenth century, Baltimore’s Archbishop John Carroll pursued a goal that the faithful could be both American and Catholic. The broad mission of the Church was (and is) to evangelize, renewing humanity in the process and spiritually transforming individuals into God’s holy people.i [1]

In those early days, the spread of the faith encountered cultural bias and required an innovative spirit. A missionary mentality prevailed, prompting clergy as well as laity to minister in ways creative and practical. The archbishop’s intuition saw education as an important means of evangelization. He envisioned a school which would pursue cultural goals and the natural development of youth. But it would be distinctive in the type of community climate it would generate – steeped, as it was, in the Gospel spirit of freedom and love. Prophetically, as the Second Vatican Council would later describe, the vision of the Catholic school would relate “all of human culture to the good news of salvation: so that the light of faith would illumine everything that the students would gradually come to learn about the world about life, and about the human person.ii [2]

The Ministry to Teach

As early as 1847, New Jersey’s own Saint Peter’s School was founded and administered by laity in New Brunswick. The stability of such parochial enterprises, however, came through Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, laywoman, convert, mother, and foundress of the Sisters of Charity. Taking her concept of a school, first attempted in Baltimore in 1808, she showed how the sharing of that vision could be accomplished. By 1859, the fifth

branch of the Maryland community had been established at Convent Station, and eight years later the Sisters of Charity assumed the responsibilities of administering the parochial school already functioning at Saint Peter's, New Brunswick.iii [3]

Just over a century later, the United States Bishops would write that Catholic schools have always had a special part in the mission of the Church. "Of the education programs available," they said in their pastoral letter *To Teach As Jesus Did*, "Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the threefold purpose (message, community, and service) of Catholic education among children and young people."iv [4]

The History

"It was (Bishop Bayley's) dream that Catholic moral teaching and values would make a difference, and Catholic school graduates would be able, because of this foundation in value-centered education, to make that difference in the American society in which they lived."v [5]

**Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick,
N.J. Catholic School Summit (November, 1988)**

Cultural Diversity and the Role of the Church

The Past

In New Jersey, Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley, the first Bishop of Newark, believed that through the establishment of Catholic schools, young people, particularly those of poor, immigrant families, could be educated as productive citizens. Writing in the *Metropolitan Catholic Almanac*, he said, "There are parochial schools connected with St. Patrick's Cathedral, St. John's church, Newark, and with most of the churches in the diocese."vi [6] Moreover, a document exists dating back to the eighteenth century which indicates that a "primitive schoolhouse was erected, and schools, supervised and supported by church authorities, established in all of the larger settlements of East Jersey."vii [7] Not surprisingly, these schools, for well over a hundred years, helped to preserve the faith and to create a Catholic subculture in our state, forming, as it were, a triangular partnership of family, parish and school.viii [8]

The Present

The Catholic schools in New Jersey serve a significant number of families within all socioeconomic areas. Through the generosity and foresight of the educational leaders of earlier generations, our schools grew with the expansion of communities and made a difference in the neighborhoods in which students lived. The challenge of the vision is no less important today for Catholics who live in these suburbs. We invite today's parents to enroll their children and to strengthen the community of family, parish and school. We urge all Catholics to support the vision.

The original concern for families, including the immigrant and the less privileged, has continued right up to the present time. We cannot overemphasize the significance of parochial schools for the “new immigrants” in our cities and suburbs. Our schools are not elitist schools. Despite a national average elementary tuition of nearly \$1,000, one-quarter of all students in Catholic schools today are minorities. The Catholic school still represents for many, especially in urban areas, an opportunity for quality education and character development.ix [9] These schools serve the poor with great effectiveness. It is hard to imagine how this achievement could be duplicated in any setting other than the Catholic school.x [10]

The United States Black Bishops Pastoral Letter, *What We Have Seen and Heard*, states that “The Catholic school has been and remains one of the chief vehicles of evangelization within the Black community.” And the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, recognizing the long record of excellence among Catholic educators generally, recommends a particular response to the educational needs of today’s Hispanics. “Education is an inalienable right,” the bishops write. “...We therefore urge Catholic schools to offer additional opportunities ... and recommend adaptations which respond adequately to the Hispanic presence in our schools.”xi [11]

The new immigrants, including Hispanics, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Koreans, Haitians and other Caribbean peoples, offer a fresh challenge to schools which traditionally empower those new to these shores to take advantage of the opportunities and freedoms of the American enterprise system.

Today, the Black bishops tell us, the Catholic school “represents – and this is no less important – a sign of stability in an environment of chaos and flux. It should be a source of legitimate pride that our schools are sought after by many who are not Catholic, as well as Catholics, because of the religious and moral values considered as part of quality education.”xii [12] The Vatican congregation reminds us, “The special character of the Catholic school, and the underlying reason for its existence, the reason why Catholic parents should prefer it, is precisely the quality of the religious education integrated into the overall education of the students.”xiii [13] The vision, therefore, remains and does not disappoint.

Today’s Research: Schools Needed More Than Ever

As important as this history is, it is clear that Catholic schools are needed today more than ever. As the current research demonstrates, they are not only graduating academically qualified students, but also young people with values and principles.xiv [14] It is inconceivable to think of the Church’s stance against today’s moral decay without the presence of its schools. What ministry in our country offers a moral vision and has a network wide enough to influence people across the nation if it is not our Catholic schools?xv [15] Pope John Paul II tells us, “in the community formed by the Catholic school, the power of the Gospel has been brought to bear on thought patterns, standards of judgment and norms of behavior.”xvi [16]

No, we dare not shrink from our vision that the Catholic school is a working, effective family ministry in the midst of the parish that deals with today's secular materialism and relativism.

The Unspoken Problem: Failure of Will

Yet there are those who say the Catholic schools are in their twilight. They cite obvious problems: skyrocketing costs, changing demographics, and low salaries which impact the morale of remaining personnel. They object that many of those who often use the schools do not see the vital connection to the faith community on Sunday morning. It seems the real nemesis in the church's evangelizing effort in Catholic school education is a loss of will. Bishop James W. Malone, former president of the U.S. Catholic Conference, indirectly expresses this concern in a recent article: "Somewhere, somehow in the last twenty-five years, an unconscious decision was made in the collective psyche of the Church in the United States, a decision that said Catholic schools are no longer an essential priority for Church life."xvii [17]

The Congregation for Catholic Education assures us that "the Church is absolutely convinced that the educational aims of the Catholic schools in the world today perform an essential and unique service for the Church itself. The absence of the Catholic school would be a great loss for civilization and for the natural and supernatural destiny of (humanity)."xviii [18]

The Reality

"Catholic schools ... are a response by the local Church to meet the command by Jesus Christ to 'teach all nations' and to assist parents in their unique responsibility to educate their children, especially in the areas of faith and morals."xix [19]

Bishop John C. Reiss (Letter to Administrators, 1982)

The Family (Parents)

The Centrality of the Catholic School in the Life of the Family

The anniversary which celebrates our basic rights as Americans provides the New Jersey Bishops with an excellent opportunity to cite the tremendous accomplishments of the state's Catholic schools and to express gratitude to the families who support Catholic school education. Clearly, the vision presses to fulfillment. Many parents sacrifice consumer goods, vacations and other pleasures enjoyed by their neighbors in order to provide their children with what is a joyful, healthy experience in Catholic schools.xx [20] They volunteer that approximately 150,000 students in the state's elementary and secondary Catholic schools avail themselves of a special type of supportive learning, grounded in the experience of Christian community, at the very time when education and family life in general are in a period of unprecedented crisis.xxi [21]

Parents should take special comfort in the realization that today's Catholic school remains the family's true complement and firm support. Undaunted by the powerful effects of television and society's secular messages, the local Catholic school uniquely celebrates the reality of Jesus and provides a setting that emphasizes God's truth, love and beauty in our world. In the Catholic school, values are shared and sacraments celebrated; through special liturgies, children learn at a young age that the Eucharist plays an integral part in their growth and development.

A Shared Responsibility for the Welfare and Evangelization of All

Our Catholic schools are effective witnesses to the presence of God among us. It is up to each of us to see that every one of our schools at least comes close to its description as a learning community of faith and love. That means our schools must be academically excellent and authentically Catholic. It also means we must do our best to see that they are open to the poor as well as the economically comfortable.xxii [22]

“The real benefit of Catholic schools is that they teach students the full truth, relating life issues to God, the author of life. The schools can and do present the revelation God has given His people along with the academics other schools provide. These truths are like pillars on which the children's lives are built. The foundation for a lifelong religious faith is laid.”xxiii [23]

Bishop Frank J. Rodimer (The Beacon, August 21, 1986)

The Interdependence of the School and the Future Church

The legacy given those nurtured in the Catholic school has distinct consequences. The data shows that Catholics who have attended Catholic school are more apt to hold Christian attitudes and values as adults. The research indicates that the effectiveness of Catholic schools is not a function of the religiousness of the family, but rather the effect of Catholic school attendance.

“Young Catholic adults (under 30) who have attended Catholic schools,” the National Opinion Research Center advises us, “are twice as likely to receive Communion almost every week, to belong to parish organizations, and to consider religious vocations than those who did not attend Catholic schools.”xxiv [24] Attending Catholic high school has a strong effect on church attendance, charitable contributions, and support for the institution of marriage.xxv [25] Catholic schools impact in this way, not so much through formal religious instruction, but rather through the closeness to the Catholic community which the experience of attending Catholic schools generates.xxvi [26]

The Educators (Teachers)

A Genuine Ministry

Whenever our Catholic schools are successful, it is because “teachers have made integral human formation their very profession.”xxvii [27] They have recognized their prime responsibility by creating a unique Christian school climate, not one in competition with the public schools.

The teacher’s ministry is at once genuine and exceptional. Through Word and Sacrament, in individual behavior, in lessons taught and lived, in friendly and harmonious interpersonal relationships, the Catholic school teacher proclaims a special witness to Gospel values.

The Contribution of Religious and Lay Teachers

A teacher sends a message to a future time he or she will never see. It is especially so with the Catholic school teacher, for he or she does so at personal expense and with a high degree of self-giving for the young. To the teacher, the Church reaffirms the value of such a singular contribution.

An immeasurable expression of gratitude is extended to the priests, religious communities, and the laity of the past and present who have made the vision real. In so many areas of the state and nation, priests, religious sisters and brothers, and lay people have contributed their very lives to maintain a quality education enriched by faith.

The Educated (Students)

An Elaboration of the Empirical Evidence and Research Statements

The students are the principal beneficiaries of the vision. In an atmosphere enlivened by the Gospel spirit of charity, freedom and responsibility, the Catholic school develops young personalities, a process that enables them to mature in that new creation they became in baptism.xxviii [28]

There are other benefits as well. Research consistently shows that Catholic schools are academically sound, more demanding in terms of course work, and more effective than public schools for comparable students.xxix [29] For example, sociologist James S. Coleman cites evidence of a 50 percent greater growth among our Catholic school students than public school students in reading, mathematics, writing and vocabulary. The Rand Corporation, a private, nonprofit research organization, advises that America’s cities would do well to pattern neighborhood high schools after Roman Catholic schools and magnet public schools that have clear missions and aggressively shape student values.xxx [30] Indeed, graduates of Catholic schools are more likely to attend college, and then continue in college than comparable graduates from public schools. Significantly, the advantages of Catholic school attendance are greatest for minority and disadvantaged students.

Coleman’s research on the Catholic school experience of a lowered dropout rate is significant. Describing the community aspects of the Catholic school community as a

benefit he calls “social capital,” he says that such social support arises from “the existence of a functional community, a set of persons held together by the Church and by common participation in religious activities – and by the explicit connection of the school with that community.”^{xxxii} [31] We identify Coleman’s functional community as the Christian community, one in which the Lord’s command to love one another is a practical reality.

The Vision

**“A community has many obligations but none more pressing than its obligation to provide for the education and development of its young people ... The best way to discharge this responsibility – as Council documents and Papal statements have emphasized so often – is through the Catholic school.”^{xxxiii} [32]
Bishop Edward T. Hughes, (Opening of School, 1987)**

A Call to the Community

“The need for the Catholic school,” Pope John Paul II tells us, “becomes evidently clear when we consider what it contributes to the development of the mission of the people of God, to the dialogue between Church and the human community and to the safeguarding of freedom and conscience.”^{xxxiii} [33]

Clearly, then, the vision still has its time.

All Catholics, especially alumni, who have benefited from the existence of the Catholic school in the historical evolution of the Church in America, need to discover its best kept secret and appreciate anew what an exceptional ministry it is, one that adds to the basic freedoms of its students and is vital in shaping the faith of the 21st century.

Consequently, all the faithful are responsible for Catholic school education, not just parents who presently have children of school age.

“The obligation to sustain the Church’s institutions,” the United States Bishops tell us, “falls on all the members of the community because of their baptism; the obligation is not just on users or those who staff them.”^{xxxiv} [34]

Likewise, every parish, whether or not it has a school, has the responsibility to provide for the Catholic school education of all young people.

These convictions require an ongoing review of priorities and energies in our state. Succinctly, they call for a recommitment to a cause which has proven itself to the people of the melting pot era and offers new hope for the future. For these “Catholic schools have a distinct character which transcends religious programs and personnel.”^{xxxv} [35]

The Enthusiasm in Serving

We pastors urge our brothers and sisters to renew their appreciation and support for a ministry which has so enthusiastically served our young people in the past.

An Understandable Cost (Similar to What our Immigrant Parents Bore) – The “New Immigrants”

Necessarily, the cost of the vision remains substantial, but has precedent. Our immigrant ancestors took from their nickels and dimes and established, at great personal sacrifice, the best private school system the world has ever known. Moreover, they did so, to a great extent, because the faith was threatened by hostile, outside forces and influences.

But, whereas the objects of our ancestors’ fears were clearly known, the superficiality of today’s society makes it, in many ways, an even more formidable foe. For the secular power of the 1990s is a vague but pervasive force. It freely invades our homes and subtly affects our choices. In a world dominated by the material, the spiritual being within is largely ignored. Even though many Catholics who send their children to public school take seriously their obligation to educate their children in the faith, in fact, more than one-third of all Catholic young people receive no formal religious education at all.xxxvi [36]

We face the poverty of the needy and the emptiness of the affluent. We worry about whether tomorrow’s Catholics will have strong faith. The Catholic school prepares our youth to meet these challenges by enlightening their minds and inspiring their hearts.

Will Parents be Challenged Anew?

The question remains whether our parents will accept the invitation to enroll their children in Catholic schools. Will they see it as a way to fulfill their responsibilities as parents? Will they be willing to do everything possible to support these schools? The financial efforts will be great, but the benefits will be greater still.xxxvii [37] Decisions made today to preserve the moral integrity of the young will reap future benefits beyond our imagination.

A Call to the Leaders

“Without the Vision, the People Perish”

“Our Church and our nation have been enriched because of the quality of education provided in Catholic schools over the last 300 years ... Now we are called to sustain and expand this vitally important ministry of the Church,” the U.S. Bishops told us in a statement of support in November 1990.xxxviii [38]

We, as Catholic Church leaders, in the State of New Jersey, reaffirm our conviction that the Catholic school has a primary place in the mission of the Church.

The Importance of Pastoral Leadership: Pastors & Principals Together <![endif]>

If it be true that unconsciously Catholic schools are no longer perceived as the foundation they once were, priests, in particular, will need to reevaluate their commitment. Without a vision shared again from the pulpit, parental responsibility will never be realized or recruitment efforts sustained.

“In my opinion,” Sister Mary Peter Traviss, O.P., said at the N.J. Catholic School Summit, “Catholic schools are no longer a priority with the faithful because we in the school community have not shared our own good news; we have not educated our Church about what some say is its most effective apostolate in terms of the future health of the Church ...”xxxix [39]

A Visionary Clergy: Back on Track

First and foremost, then, we encourage our pastors, in their vital leadership role, to appreciate the concept of the regionalized school. Every parish – whether it has its own school or not – shares the responsibility to preserve and develop Catholic school education within the diocese.xl [40]

While Catholic schools have been identified historically with a particular parish, these co-sponsored schools will necessarily lead to broader cooperation among parishes. Local policies must be developed to insure mutual participation in a school’s governance and a basic fairness in sharing the cost of its support. It will be necessary that tuition rates and charges be balanced and regulated in light of the whole community’s responsibility to educate effectively the next generation in the faith.

Planning, long-range and short-range, is essential. Such planning may well lead to fewer schools in a given geographical area or even to the erection of new buildings where required. Catholics in general must be more realistic about church contributions; the financial difficulties of the schools would be greatly alleviated if Catholics gave more than 1.1 percent of their income, just half of what they once gave.xli [41]

Justice and the Catholic School Teacher

Without doubt, Catholic schools are an expensive operation. They receive practically no help from public sources. The gift of the Church to the community at large now amounts to over \$1 billion per year in New Jersey. Even with such a huge outlay, the reality of Catholic school education in the state would not be possible without significant contributed services from lay teachers who work for wages far less than those paid in public schools. <![endif]>

Unfortunately, it is impossible to compete with the state in the matter of salaries. Moreover, the increase in operational costs which better salaries would demand must not add to the expense in such a way that the poor are excluded. We cannot be genuinely Catholic if we ever do that.xlii [42]

But justice also demands that teacher salaries be review and adjusted. It is a most pressing need. As bishops, we recognize that we must provide our teachers, both religious and lay, with a remuneration which is proper and in keeping with their important service.xliii [43] We commit ourselves to the principle that those who serve the Church should receive a sufficient livelihood and enjoy the social benefits common in our nation.xliv [44] We encourage the whole Catholic community to support our Catholic school teachers in an equitable manner.

“It is essential that the entire Church ... recognize the value and importance of Catholic schools. The obstacles (they face) will not be overcome easily. To surmount them will require additional sacrifice and commitment on everyone’s part. Careful planning will be critical. Difficult decisions will need to be made. Restructuring rarely takes place without some dislocation and pain. ... Above all, we must work together if we are to preserve the precious legacy of a Catholic school education available to all families.”xlv [45]

**Bishop James T. McHugh,
(Response to the Catholic School Planning and Development Committee, 1990)**

New Solutions to Common Problems

Alternate Funding – A Call to the Extended Community

Of course, the solution to our funding problems cannot remain solely within the domain of tuition and parish subsidy. Creatively, new alternate funding methods must be sought and explored. Beyond the wider Catholic community, appeals for assistance need to be made to the corporate communities and to those who hold political office in our municipalities, state and nation.

Marketing and Public Relations

This will necessarily involve a more effective marketing of our schools, a public relations effort which can accomplish a number of things. First, we must show how Catholic schools complement and help parents. Next, we must underscore the great success our schools have had in reacting to the needs of the disadvantaged and the country’s “new immigrants.” And finally, we should demonstrate how our religious curriculum confronts many of the ills which our society experiences, while offering genuine community.xlvi [46]

Staff Development

Presently, as the research shows, the Catholic religious identity of our schools and their academic competence remain high. But we stand on the shoulders of the giants who have preceded us. If our schools are to continue to be the vehicles of evangelization that they are, lay leadership identification and training must become priorities in our planning. For the future to be assured, the vision must be shared. Only through effective staff development can we guarantee the quality of our schools.

Higher Education's Responsibility

Now is the time for the Catholic institutions of higher learning in the United States to return to the parishes in some small measure what they have derived from the religious orthodoxy of the elementary and secondary Catholic schools.xlvii [47] In this regard, these institutions can provide invaluable assistance in educating future Catholic school teachers of our state at minimal or greatly reduced costs.

The State's Responsibility

With any analysis at all, it is clear Catholic schools have been the victims of widespread bias. While paying lip service to the merits of Catholic school education, many public officials refuse to give the schools their fair share of public funding. Consider the exclusion of church-related schools from voucher plans which would provide a real choice of schools to parents. All too often the Church is called upon to assist in social programs, ecumenical dialogues and even political endeavors, yet requests for reciprocal assistance in securing aid for Catholic school parents and students are consistently rejected.xlviii [48]

Real Choice: Vouchers

Now is the time to galvanize our Catholic laity. One of the great injustices in our society, unique among the Western democracies, is the lack of tax support for parents who educate their children in religious schools. Under an all-inclusive voucher system, one based squarely on the constitutional right all parents have to choose the school their children will attend, Catholic elementary and secondary schools would receive the type of support that until now has been reserved for public and religious schools of higher education. In this regard, the Constitutional question of the separation of Church and state has never been compelling.

Additionally, public education itself could improve through a new standard of competition. John E. Chubb of the Brookings Institution and Stanford University political science professor Terry M. Moe feel that the only way to make real headway in America's educational problems is to create an entirely new system of public education – one based solely on parental choice. “Our guiding principle in the design of a choice system is this: Public authority must be put to use in creating a system that is almost entirely beyond the reach of public authority.”xlix [49] President Bush's educational choice initiative provides a breath of hope for the parents and children of Catholic schools. Catholics should endorse the President's plan by appealing to their legislators for support.

Conclusion

We, the Bishops of New Jersey, believe that the Catholics of today are as strong as their parents and grandparents. We feel that finances and needed resources are as available to

us at they were to our ancestors. But the reality of the best kept secret needs to stir the hearts of the extended faithful.

We accept, then, the challenge the Holy Father gives us to develop new approaches to preserve our Catholic schools. In this year of the Bill of Rights, we agree that “There are many paths to democracy and public education. The path America has been treading for the past half-century is exacting a heavy price – one the nation and its children can ill afford to bear, and need not.”¹ [50]

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- iii[3] [The History of St. Peter’s Elementary School](#), Diocese of Metuchen Files.
- iv[4] [To Teach As Jesus Did](#), 1972, #101.
- v[5] Archbishop McCarrick, [Pastoral Letter on Catholic School Education](#), August, 1987.
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