Catholic Education, in Need of Salvation

By Patrick J. McCloskey and Joseph Claude Harris
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CATHOLIC parochial education is in crisis. More than a third of parochial schools in the United States closed between 1965 and 1990, and enrollment fell by more than half. After stabilizing in the 1990s, enrollment has plunged despite strong demand from students and families.

Closings of elementary and middle schools have become a yearly ritual in the Northeast and Midwest, home to two-thirds of the nation’s Catholic schools. Last year, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia closed one-fifth of its elementary schools. Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, the archbishop of New York, is expected to decide soon whether to shut 26 elementary schools and one high school, less than three years after the latest closings. Catholic high schools have held on, but their long-term future is in question.

This isn’t for want of students. Almost 30 percent of Catholic schools have waiting lists, even after sharp tuition increases over the past decade. The American Catholic population has grown by 45 percent since 1965. Hispanics, who are often underserved by public schools, account for about 45 percent of American Catholics and an even higher proportion of Catholic children, but many cannot afford rising fees.

Since the early 19th century, parochial schools have given free or affordable educations to needy and affluent students alike. Inner-city Catholic schools, which began by serving poor European immigrants, severed the connection between poverty and low academic performance for generations of low-income (and often non-Catholic) minority kids.

Until the 1960s, religious orders were united in responding to Christ’s mandate to “go teach.” But religious vocations have become less attractive, and parochial schools have faced increasing competition from charter schools. Without a turnaround, many dioceses will soon have only scatterings of elite Catholic academies for middle-class and affluent families and a token number of inner-city schools, propped up by wealthy donors.

As in other areas, the church has lost its way, by failing to prioritize parochial education. Despite the sex-abuse scandals and two recessions, church revenue — which flows from parishes via Sunday donations, bequests and so on — grew to $11.9 billion in 2010, an inflation-adjusted increase of $2.2 billion from a decade earlier. Yet educational subsidies have fallen; the church now pays at least 12.6 percent of parochial elementary school costs, down from 63 percent in 1965.
Much of the money has gone to paying for a growing staff: about 170,000 laypeople, priests and members of religious orders, including some unpaid volunteers, responsible for more than 17,000 parishes. Since 2000, there has been more than a 25 percent increase in lay ecclesial ministers, who serve alongside priests and deacons in ministering to colleges, hospitals and prisons and caring for bereaved or homebound parishioners.

The church should shift its spending and also hold ambitious fund-raising drives. Instead of approaching donors with the least effective pitch — filling deficits — educators, pastors and prelates should propose new initiatives (with help from Web sites like DonorsChoose.org and Kickstarter) and new schools.

Bishops preach social justice but fail to practice it within the church. Thirty percent of American parishes report operating deficits, but there is no systemic means for wealthier dioceses and parishes to help poorer ones — and to stave off self-defeating tuition increases.

After finances, personnel is the biggest challenge. Once upon a time, a pastor and two assistant priests took care of religious duties, while nuns ran the parish schools. Now, typically, there is just a beleaguered pastor (increasingly born and trained in Asia, Africa or Latin America) without any experience in running the business side of a parish and a school. Priests’ collars and nuns’ habits have become rare sights in parochial schools.

One solution is at hand. In the late 1960s, the Vatican allowed men to be ordained as deacons, who are clergy with many but not all the powers of a priest. Today there are almost 17,000 in the United States, about the same number as active diocesan priests. Over the next decade, the diaconate will continue to grow, while the number of ordained priests is projected to decline to 12,500 by 2035.

Many deacons have valuable professional, managerial and entrepreneurial expertise that could revitalize parochial education. If they were given additional powers to perform sacraments and run parishes, a married priesthood would become a fait accompli. Celibacy should be a sacrifice offered freely, not an excuse for institutional suicide.

Without an overhaul of money and personnel, the future of Catholic education is grim. Since 1990, the church has closed almost 1,500 parishes. Most were small, but just as big-city parochial schools are being closed, thriving urban parishes may be next on the chopping block.

“The school is more necessary than the church,” said John J. Hughes, the first archbishop of New York. Unless the Vatican and the American bishops heed those words, the decline in parochial education may forewarn the fate of the church itself.

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