



# **Catholic schools in a secularized society**

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## **Introduction**

It is truly a pleasure and a privilege to be part of this event devoted to consideration of a critically important topic. Although I am not an American-flag waver and always very willing to admit the unfortunate contributions of some Americans to the devolution of western civilization, this time I am going to use the American scene as a point of reference or departure for several reasons. First, the assault on Catholicism hitting Western (and Eastern) Europe now with a vengeance is something American Catholics had to confront in many ways two centuries ago, albeit with critical differences. Second, the American response, especially through the establishment of the Catholic school system can and should be programmatic for Europe; indeed, it was a unique experiment in Church history, a response not to secularization (as such) but to virulent anti-Catholicism. Third, the secularization effort in Europe and elsewhere does indeed have a predominantly anti-Catholic thrust, predicated on the principle that going for the biggest religious body will bring down the rest.

## **I. A Brief Overview of American Political History**

The White Anglo-Saxon Protestant historical narrative would have us believe that American history began with the thirteen original English colonies. Of course, that is not the case because the Spanish involvement actually predates the English by more than a century. However, for the sake of “conventionality,” let’s use the Protestant version as our starting point.

The majority of the early colonists came to the “New World” (from a European perspective) for reasons of either faith or fortune, that is, to escape religious persecution or to make it “big” in what looked to be an entirely open market from a financial and commercial perspective. Their hopes were so high that they even had recourse to biblical language suggesting that the “New World” was a new “Promised Land.” Leaving aside their overall treatment of the indigenous peoples (which was, by the way, far worse at the hands of English Protestants than of Spanish Catholics), we find a deeply religious people, even if relatively intolerant of what some today would call “diversity.” There is high irony here, to be sure, since so many of them had left the mother country, precisely due to religious intolerance. And while many could allow for some religious diversity, it was limited to what we would now classify as “mainstream Protestantism.” No such toleration could even be imagined for Catholics who, in most of the original thirteen colonies, could not vote or hold public office. While we Catholics were the principal victims of intolerance, it is worth citing

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<sup>1</sup> Ponencia en el Congreso Internacional “¿Una Sociedad Despersonalizada? Propuestas Educativas”, de la Universitat Abat Oliba CEU (Barcelona, 13-15 de abril de 2010).



Cardinal Newman's insight that a coming age of "infidelity" would make the Catholic-Protestant battles seem inconsequential<sup>1</sup>.

With independence from England and the establishment of the Constitution of the new nation, various safeguards were instituted to guarantee freedom of conscience – more often noted in the breach than in the observance, especially for Catholics. The First Amendment to the Constitution speaks of "Congress mak[ing] no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."<sup>2</sup> By the time Thomas Jefferson referred to that legal doctrine as the "separation of Church and State" in 1802, the nervousness of the Holy See becomes quite understandable, especially because she viewed it through the prism of the European experience of hostile regimes (e.g., French Revolution).

The reaction of the Holy See, while not irrational, was only partially correct. Yes, there was (and still is) a deeply anti-Catholic bias in the American ethos, however, the equally deep religiosity of the people and the freedoms that flowed to the Church (eventually) enabled us Catholics to outstrip every other religious grouping in terms of education, professional achievement, and economic standing by the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Here let me distinguish between secularity and secularization. There is a good secularity or "laicity" (we don't even really have the latter word in the American lexicon!), which the Church has come to recognize, especially as she has viewed the American situation from the vantage point of the twentieth century. Jesuit Father John Courtney Murray helped the Church Universal come to this awareness through his ground-breaking book, *We Hold These Truths* (1960), and through his contributions to the decree on religious liberty at Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*. Father Murray stressed that freedom *for* religion, not freedom *from* religion was the goal of the U. S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. Secularization, on the other hand, is a conscious effort to marginalize religion, religious influence and religiously motivated citizens. Peter Berkowitz uses the French situation as a point of contrast: ". . . the doctrine of *laïcité* – which is inscribed in Article 1 of the French Constitution and proclaims France a secular republic – separates Church and State differently than in America. For many French, *laïcité*, roughly translated as national secularism, has acquired a militant meaning, according to which government must confine religion to the private sphere."<sup>3</sup>

Let me anticipate one of my ultimate conclusions by submitting at this moment that vigorous secularization demands vigorous evangelization: for the sake of the Church's future and for the sake of a society's future (*pro mundi salute*, as the Liturgy of the Hours puts it).

I believe that Divine Providence saw to it that two sets of circumstances coalesced in the American situation, giving the Church the possibility of not only surviving but even thriving.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf: J. H. Newman (1956). *The Infidelity of the Future, Faith and Prejudice*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 113-128.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion of this matter, consult S. Manisfield (2007). *Ten Tortured Words: How the Founding Fathers Tried to Protect Religion in America, and What's Happened Since*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>3</sup> P. Berkowitz, "Can Sarkozy Justify Banning the Veil?" *Wall Street Journal*, 5 2010, A19. The comments of the President of Malta, welcoming Pope Benedict XVI on 17 April 2010, are also a good example of a Church-State relationship which is secular but not hostile to religion and religious influences.



The first was the constitutional reality and, given the essential commitment to fairness endemic to the American people, there was good reason to hope that religious freedom would eventually be extended even to Catholics. The second fact concerns what we might term the fundamental “religiosity” of Americans, noted by the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835. He writes in *Democracy in America*: “The religious aspect was the first thing that struck my attention.” That same observation comes from the pen of the great English convert, G. K. Chesterton, who dubbed the United States “the nation with the soul of a Church” (*What I Saw in America*, 1922).

That basic religiosity is still operative in spite of many secularizing forces exercised by a vocal even if tiny minority. The liberal media elite consistently attempt to drive public opinion in a leftward direction, but numerous studies have demonstrated that those people are very far removed from the average citizen. Indeed, their positions on matters like the existence of God, the importance of church membership and attendance, abortion, pornography and issues of sexuality are polar opposites to those of the vast majority of the population.<sup>4</sup> Another example: no U. S. President could ever be elected who did not give at least lip-service to religion. Or again, visitors (especially from Europe) are always amazed at the friendliness of the populace toward clergy and religious on the street, even in such a rough and tough environment as New York City. Being greeted as a priest in public is a commonplace in the United States; it is a rarity in Rome.

All that said, it is important to point out that for the first time in our history, the Catholic Church is experiencing hostile incursions from a President, highlighted in the annual report of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights:

Leading the charge against the Catholic Church at the federal level is the Obama Administration. Such hostility to matters Catholic has not been seen in Washington for a very long time. The President refused to speak at Georgetown University unless it agreed to put a drape over the Latin [sic] words for Jesus (he didn’t want IHS to appear in the background when he spoke); he chose several anti-Catholics to join his staff; and he worked hard for a health care bill that contained public funding for abortion and jeopardized the conscience rights of health care employees.<sup>5</sup>

This point is seemingly not grasped by many Europeans, including not a few Vatican officials. In other words, the United States could be moving in the direction of overt government hostility to the Church, rather than neutrality or even benevolence.

What kind of secularity would be beneficial to the Church – and society? One which promotes pluralism, a concept espoused by most modern democracies. The very expression, however, is fraught with problems, because divergent interpretations of pluralism are possible, as Father Andrew Greeley has noted: “The two principal models for viewing the phenomenon of ethnicity and acculturation in the United States are the melting

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<sup>4</sup> This was documented in a most impressive way in Lichter and Rothman’s study in 1980; their work has become the standard point of departure for all subsequent discussions of this “disconnect” between “regular” people and those in control of the media. Cf. B. Goldberg (2003). *Arrogance: Rescuing America from the Media Elite*. New York: Warner Books.

<sup>5</sup> Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights (2010). *2009 Report on Anti-Catholicism*, New York: Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, v.



pot model of the assimilationists and the mosaic model of the cultural pluralists.”<sup>6</sup> Since American society has become more sensitized to minorities and the importance of maintaining continuity with one’s cultural and ethnic roots, the melting pot theory has fallen into disfavor, because it “usually means Anglo conformity.”<sup>7</sup> The mosaic model, then, would seem to be viable, because it enables diversity to flourish within a unity of purpose, achieving unity without uniformity.

From a religious perspective, that would mean not mere toleration of religious influences but encouragement of them. Indeed, the very nature of a free society demands that all voices be raised and that all be respectfully heard, including religious voices.

Let me backtrack now into a hasty overview of the history of Catholic schooling in the United States, with reference to ecclesiastical law, both universal and particular, before pushing ahead into a consideration of its necessity beyond the borders of the United States.

## II. American Catholic Schools in Historical and Theological Perspective<sup>8</sup>

The first school within the territorial expanse of what is now the United States was a Catholic school, established by the Franciscans in Florida in 1606. The opening of schools in all the Spanish territories was a pattern followed in California and New Mexico as the Franciscans sought to educate the children of both the colonists and the indigenous peoples.

The French exploration of the New World led to the opening of the first school for boys in New Orleans in 1722 by a Capuchin friar; the Ursuline nuns began a girls’ school in that city five years later. These schools became prototypes of those to spring up along the St. Lawrence River and in St. Louis, Kaskaskia, Mackinaw, Detroit, Vincennes, and Maine (where a Catholic school existed as early as 1640).

In the British colonies Catholics experienced relative freedom only in Maryland (as long as Catholics ruled) and in Pennsylvania; it was in places such as these that Catholic education began its development into the system it is today. The groundwork laid during the colonial period served as the foundation for the massive Catholic educational effort that would flourish within fifty years of the ratification of the Constitution.

The bishops at the First Provincial Council of Baltimore in 1829 asserted: “We judge it absolutely necessary that schools be established in which the young may be taught the principles of faith and morality, while being instructed in letters.”<sup>9</sup> The bishops of the nation made that judgment a matter of law in 1884 at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore.<sup>10</sup>

Much of what parochial schools became and still are came about through a series of events played out in New York City. The chief protagonist was Archbishop John Hughes, who,

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<sup>6</sup> A. Greeley (1977). *The American Catholic Basic Books*, New York, 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> For greater detail, Cf: J. Burns et al. (1937). *A History of Catholic Education in the United States*. New York: Benziger, 35. I am also well aware of the fact that there are Catholic schools all over the world. My point is that the universal goal of Catholic education in the United States came about from a unique vision, namely, that every Catholic child belongs in a Catholic school.

<sup>9</sup> P. Guilday (1969). *A History of the Councils of Baltimore*, New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 94.

<sup>10</sup> (1886) *Decreta Concilii Baltimorensis Tertii*, Baltimore: John Murphy and Company, 4.



from 1840 to 1842, was embroiled in a heated controversy over Catholic children and their education.<sup>11</sup> His first complaint centered on the overt anti-Catholicism in the so-called public schools. When assurances were given that the most offensive aspects of this bigotry would be stopped, he next attacked Bible-reading in the schools as a sectarian religious exercise, unacceptable to the Catholic community. He was joined in this battle by Unitarians, Jews, other religious minorities, and atheists. Unwittingly, he may well have paved the way for the secular humanism that now prevails in America's state schools.

His most notable achievement was gaining for the immigrants the right to operate and control their own schools. He was unsuccessful in obtaining public funds for the schools, however, and began to rely on religious orders to provide low-cost, quality education, moving away from the lay teachers who actually predominated in the Catholic schools before that time. His decision to abandon the battle with secular authorities served as further impetus for the establishment of a separate school system for American Catholics. He believed strongly and sincerely that "the days have come, and the place, in which the school is more necessary than the church."

Not all American bishops agreed with Hughes on either the necessity of Catholic schools or the desirability of state aid. Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul expressed a cautious but clear desire to utilize the state schools. Ireland's suggestions along these lines were vehemently attacked by many of his brother-bishops, most notably by John Lancaster Spaulding, Bishop of Peoria. He contended, like Hughes, that "without parish schools, there is no hope that the Church will be able to maintain itself in America." Unlike Hughes, though, Spaulding recoiled from the thought of any kind of governmental assistance for parochial schools, for fear of governmental interference.<sup>12</sup>

While the first Catholic school operated on the North American continent as early as 1606, it took more than two centuries for those institutions to be organized into anything resembling a system. A German-born Redemptorist and naturalized American citizen named John Neumann accomplished that feat. As the fourth bishop of Philadelphia, Neumann established a diocesan board of education with clerical and lay representatives from every parish in the diocese. Through this body of advisors and due to his own personal drive, parochial education prospered in Philadelphia and became a unified, coherent system, making Philadelphia a model for the nation and Neumann "the father of parochial schools in America."

By 1892, Philadelphia's Archbishop Patrick John Ryan had appointed a priest to full-time work as diocesan superintendent of schools. The commitment to Catholic education continued to grow and under Cardinal Dennis Dougherty (1918–1951), a unique system of free Catholic high schools flourished. What was a priority for the Ordinary was expected to be a priority for his clergy, as pastors unwilling to open parish schools were threatened with removal.<sup>13</sup>

Some American bishops opted for an "assimilationist" form of Catholicism (condemned in 1899 by Pope Leo XIII as "Americanism" in *Testem Benevolentiae*); Americanism maintained that Catholic doctrine should be presented in a way that would cause as little difference to surface with Protestants as possible. Educationally, the Americanists were

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<sup>11</sup>Cf: R. Shaw & Dagger, John (1977). *The Life of Archbishop John Hughes*. New York: Paulist Press.

<sup>12</sup>Cf: D. Sweeney (1966). *The Life of John Lancaster Spaulding*. New York: Herder and Herder, 216.

<sup>13</sup>Cf: J. Connell (1976) (ed.), *The History of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 354.



opposed to parochial schools, however, by the time the Code of Canon Law was enacted in 1917, they had to face this strong statement: “Catholic children are not to attend non-Catholic, neutral or mixed schools” (canon 1374). Where no other alternative was available, the bishop himself had to determine what dangers to the Faith existed and then judge if a dispensation from the law would be tolerable.

The rationale behind this stringent injunction was explained clearly by Pope Pius XI in *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929): “The so-called ‘neutral’ school from which religion is excluded, is contrary to the fundamental principles of education. Such a school moreover cannot exist in practice; it is bound to become irreligious.” While this kind of thinking has been characterized by some as a “fortress” or “siege” mentality, few observers can doubt that the American public or state school is a potent example of a “neutral” school system becoming “irreligious” *de facto* and, some would add, *de jure*, thanks to several secularizing decisions of the Supreme Court, generally opposed by popular opinion.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council dealt with Catholic education extensively as they followed the trajectory of Church teaching to that point and contributed to its development as well. Several comments bear notice from *Gravissimum Educationis*:

The Church's involvement in the field of education is demonstrated especially by the Catholic school. . . . Therefore, since it can contribute so substantially to fulfilling the mission of God's people, and can further the dialogue between the Church and the family of man, to their mutual benefit, the Catholic school retains its immense importance in the circumstances of our times too. . . . As for Catholic parents, the Council calls to mind their duty to entrust their children to Catholic schools. . . (n. 8).

In 1971 the American bishops issued a pastoral letter on Catholic education, *To Teach as Jesus Did*. It became the standard by which to judge all Catholic schools, outlining as it did the goals and objectives for all Catholic institutions of learning. Included is the following statement: “(Catholic schools) are the most effective means available to the Church for the education of children and young people.” Some commentators have noted the irony that in that very same year, bishops were closing schools at the rate of one a day.

Pope Paul VI's bicentennial message to the Church in the United States contained praise for the American Catholic school system and an encouragement to continue the tradition: “The strength of the Church in America (is) in the Catholic schools.”<sup>14</sup> Nor was it sheer coincidence that the two American citizens Paul VI canonized in connection with the nation's bicentennial, Bishop John Neumann of Philadelphia<sup>15</sup> and Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton of New York,<sup>16</sup> were prime movers in the parochial school effort. Indeed, the other few American saints that there are all likewise have a strong commitment to Catholic schools as part of their dossier: Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini, Mother Theodore Guerin, Mother Rose Philippine Duchesne, Mother Katherine Drexel.

The first thorough analysis of Catholic education in modern times was offered by the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education in 1977. *The Catholic School* probed every aspect of the educational process and also recognized the fact that some people had

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Paul VI (1976). “Heritage of Freedom,” *The Pope Speaks* 21, 241.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Paul VI (1977). “A Life of Love for Others,” *The Pope Speaks* 22, 223.

<sup>16</sup> Pope Paul VI (1975). “Elizabeth Ann Seton,” *The Pope Speaks* 20, 207.



suggested the phasing out of Catholic schools. Its conclusion was that “to give in to them would be suicidal.”<sup>17</sup>

Pope John Paul II's esteem for the American Catholic school system was evident in his 1979 videotaped message to the National Catholic Educational Association gathered in Philadelphia that year for its annual convention, in which he said that he hoped to give “a new impulse to Catholic education throughout the vast area of the United States of America.” He went on to say: “Yes, the Catholic school must remain a privileged means of Catholic education in America. . . , worthy of the greatest sacrifices.”<sup>18</sup> He likewise referred to the Catholic school as “the heart of the Church.”<sup>19</sup> Pope Benedict XVI has followed the same pattern, devoting an entire address to Catholic education during his 2008 pastoral visit to the United States. He recalled:

. . . the history of this nation includes many examples of the Church's commitment in this regard. The Catholic community here has in fact made education one of its highest priorities. This undertaking has not come without great sacrifice. Towering figures, like Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and other founders and foundresses, with great tenacity and foresight, laid the foundations of what is today a remarkable network of parochial schools contributing to the spiritual well-being of the Church and the nation.

He went on:

This sacrifice continues today. It is an outstanding apostolate of hope, seeking to address the material, intellectual and spiritual needs of over three million children and students. . . . Their long-term sustainability must be assured. Indeed, everything possible must be done, in cooperation with the wider community, to ensure that they are accessible to people of all social and economic strata. No child should be denied his or her right to an education in faith, which in turn nurtures the soul of a nation.<sup>20</sup>

I trust you did not miss the Pope's reference to the schools' contribution to “the soul of a nation.”

At its peak, Catholic schooling in the United States reached more than half the target population – an achievement unique in Church history. The post-Vatican II confusion had a most deleterious effect on the schools, especially in the mass exodus of thousands of clergy and religious, which, in turn, raised doubts about the future of these schools. Add to that, a mode of thinking which had taken root in many sectors of the Catholic community, calling into question the very desirability and existence of a separate Catholic school system. Further, Catholic movement from cities to suburbs found many dioceses

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<sup>17</sup> Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977). *The Catholic School*. Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Pope John Paul II (1979). “Pope's Message on Catholic Education,” *I'Osservatore Romano*, 30 April 1979, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Pope: Schools Are Heart of Church,” *Catholic Standard and Times* (Philadelphia), 26 November 1981, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Meeting with Catholic Educators at The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 17 April 2008.



unprepared or unwilling to provide the Catholic schools needed to accommodate the population shift. The end-result was a halving of the Catholic school population in a forty-year period.

Challenges facing Catholic schools include: escalating costs; a small but persistent Catholic home-schooling movement; failure to reach the children of new immigrants.

With heavy reliance on lay teachers and other costs due to increasing commitment to professionalism, tuition has sky-rocketed in recent years, thus putting Catholic education out of reach for many parents. Perhaps the hardest hit have been those of the middle-income bracket, who often do not qualify for tuition assistance programs because of the appearance of financial sufficiency. Creative means are being sought in many dioceses to address this problem, as well as by the Catholic Education Foundation, which I serve as executive director.<sup>21</sup>

A perennial goal of the Church in the United States has been to obtain justice for parents of children in religiously oriented schools through government assistance in the form of tax credits or vouchers. In instances where some limited assistance has been available, it has alleviated enrollment hemorrhaging. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) takes aim at governments that make genuine freedom of choice in education burdensome: “Public authorities must see to it that ‘public subsidies are so allocated that parents are truly free to exercise this right without incurring unjust burdens. Parents should not have to sustain, directly or indirectly, extra charges which would deny or unjustly limit the exercise of this freedom’” (n. 241).<sup>22</sup>

Home-schooling has never been viewed as a Catholic approach to education until recent years. This phenomenon has two origins. First, many Catholics have been heavily influenced by Fundamentalist and Evangelical Christians who turned to home-schooling in large numbers as a result of the strong pattern of secularization that infected the government schools, on which they had hitherto relied. Second, in places where Catholic schools were losing their unique Catholic identity, parents often determined to take matters into their own hands by providing what they believed would be a more authentic Catholic education than was seemingly being offered by Catholic schools of their experience. Inasmuch as these parents are usually rather orthodox in their theology and practice and likewise have larger families, their absence from the Catholic schools has had a negative impact in certain places, even leading to the closure of schools due to a commitment to home-schooling. Not infrequently, such parents assert that their practice is in keeping with Church teaching, especially as that relates to their being the “primary educators” of their children. However, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* also teaches: “Parents are the first educators, not the only educators, of their children. It belongs to them, therefore, to exercise with responsibility their educational activity in close and vigilant cooperation with civil and ecclesial agencies” (n. 240).

Historically, the Church in the United States, especially during the major waves of immigration of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, considered the Catholic education of the immigrants’ children to be a top priority, thus ensuring at one and the same time, the life-long identification of those children with the Catholic Church, along with their concomitant entrance into the mainstream of American social and political life. For at

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<sup>21</sup> Visit our website: [www.catholiceducationfoundation.com](http://www.catholiceducationfoundation.com)

<sup>22</sup> See also my own recent revision of an earlier work: (2009). *Constitutional Rights and Religious Prejudice: Catholic Education as the Battleground*. Pine Beach, New Jersey: Newman House Press.





least two generations, that policy has not been vigorously followed, particularly with regard to Hispanic Catholics, fewer than 4% of whose children attend Catholic schools. This pastoral lacuna has finally been acknowledged in *To Nurture the Soul of a Nation: Latino Families, Catholic Schools, and Educational Opportunity* (2009), which sets a goal of one million Hispanic children in Catholic schools by 2020.

With the passage of time, and much wiser for the experience, the Catholic community in the United States has demonstrated a renewed interest in Catholic education as enrollments have stabilized and even increased in many dioceses, especially in high-growth areas. Schools are on the rebound, in terms of reclaiming a truly Catholic identity, highlighted in surveys done by various sociologists which show that graduates of post-conciliar Catholic schools continue to be markedly different from their public school counterparts, especially in regard to Sunday Mass attendance, attitudes on abortion, willingness to consider a priestly or religious vocation, and generosity to the local parish (both in service and in donations).<sup>23</sup>

At yet another level, the success story of Catholic schools in the United States plays out with phenomenal regularity in the academic realm. Professor John Coleman of the University of Chicago documents an impressive performance record for Catholic high school students, which indicates that they outstrip not only public school students but also – and amazingly so – students from private schools. The reason for the success, according to Coleman, is because of religious and moral values and because of the coordination between home and school. These two aspects are most significant in explaining the incredible achievements of youngsters in inner-city Catholic schools.<sup>24</sup>

As new challenges and new opportunities emerge, it is safe to say that new forms of governance and financing will be needed to ensure that Catholic schools remain a vital part of American Catholic life.

### III. Pluralism and Democracy Need a Voice – and a Training Ground

As I have already argued, genuine pluralism demands a plurality of voices which, in turn, needs a source for the development of those voices. Not surprisingly, every godless revolution has outlawed Catholic schools as its first offensive in attacks on the Church, knowing that a Church without schools is a Church without a future. Indeed, at the very peak of a strong anti-Catholic movement in the United States, the State of Oregon actually attempted to outlaw Catholic schools, resulting in the 1925 landmark judicial decision, vindicating the rights of parents in general and of Catholics in particular; interestingly, it is

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<sup>23</sup> Cf: A. Greeley (1976). *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church*, Kansas City: Sheed & Ward and (1981). *Young Catholics in the United States and Canada*, New York: Sadlier & Co. All subsequent studies demonstrate the same results. Worth reviewing are the following: William Sander, “The Effects of Catholic Schools on Religiosity, Education, and Competition,” Occasional Paper No. 32 of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education of Teachers College, Columbia University; Mary Gauthier, “Does Catholic Education Make a Difference?” National Catholic Reporter, 30 September 2005. A worthwhile resource is the Catholic Education Research blog, which “is dedicated to the thoughtful discussion of current and future research on Catholic education.” Most interesting is the following article documenting non-Catholic support for Catholic schools due to their superior academic accomplishments and their civic contribution: Christopher Levenick, An Episcopalian, an Atheist, and a Jew Walk into a Catholic School, *Philanthropy*, 1 April 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Taking the Coleman study as a starting point and updating the material is the work of Helen M. Marks, with her essay, Perspectives on Catholic Schools, found in Mark Berends (2009). *Handbook of Research on School Choice*, New York: Routledge.



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the only U. S. Supreme Court decision<sup>25</sup> ever quoted in a papal encyclical, namely, Pius XI's *Divini Illius Magistri*.

In some ways, traditionally Catholic countries in Europe have been living in a fool's paradise, thinking that the religion taught in state schools is providing what is needed to raise up a generation of counter-cultural agents; indeed, in many places (e.g., Italy), the religion classes in the state schools are generally a farce, with the priests teaching in them treated with disrespect and the classes themselves often becoming a platform for anti-religious propaganda. In other places, if the classes have not devolved into that mode, one can be sure that such comfortable arrangements will be attacked and whittled away at until they just disappear. Therefore, it is essential that hierarchy and laity alike make serious preparations for the establishment of a Catholic school system, whose goals should be two-fold: positively: conveying the beauty and the glories embodied in the Catholic intellectual tradition;<sup>26</sup> negatively: providing an honest, comprehensive and compelling critique of the contemporary (anti)culture. Now that you have heard some of the historical background to the Catholic educational system in the U.S., along with its accomplishments, I hope it can serve as a kind of object lesson for what I believe a similar effort can accomplish for other countries.

Theodore Sizer has concluded that "as a matter of public policy, education should move toward institutional pluralism."<sup>27</sup> This opinion would obviously hold that a multiplicity of educational forms would more accurately reflect the multiplicity of publics forming a nation, leading to an enhancement of the overall educational process and final output. R. Freeman Butts would certainly disagree with such a philosophy and policy since he understands governmental goals in education thus:

The prime purpose for a public rather than a private education was political; it was to prepare the young for their role as self-governing citizens rather than as subjects bound to an alien sovereign or as private persons loyal to their families, their kinsfolk, their churches, their localities or neighborhoods, or their ethnic traditions. In its origin, the idea of public education was not to promote the individual needs and interests<sup>28</sup> of children, not to prepare for a better job, not to get into college.

I hope you caught his snide remark about Catholics' owing allegiance to "an alien sovereign," meaning the Pope. However, even Butts admits that: "Pluralism has had a rapid rise in popularity among an increasing number of critics of public education during the past decade or so."<sup>29</sup>

Sizer mused about where educational pluralism might lead. He saw Catholics in the forefront of the movement to give institutional expression to the principle of educational pluralism. His conclusion was a cautious prognostication based on socio-political realities: "In fact, this day may represent the darkness before the dawn for them; they may be the

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<sup>25</sup> Cf: *Pierce vs. Society of Sisters*, 268 U.S. 535, 1925.

<sup>26</sup> Cf: T.Woods (2005). *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*. Washington D.C.: Regnery.

<sup>27</sup> T. Sizer (1976). Education and Assimilation. *Phi Delta Kappan* 58, September 1976, 35.

<sup>28</sup> R. Freeman Butts (1979). Education Vouchers, *Phi Delta Kappan* 61, September 1979, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Butts, Education Vouchers, 10.



harbingers of a pattern politically acceptable in the late seventies and 1980's."<sup>30</sup> His timeline may have been a bit too optimistic.

The American public school, born of the religious conflicts and compromises of the nineteenth century, was charged with serving as "the nation's main agency of assimilation and Americanization."<sup>31</sup> Robert Lynn's observations shed much light on where parochial schools fitted, or did not fit, into the whole process. According to him, the controversy over government aid to such institutions was frequently rooted in anti-Catholic prejudice but, even more important, it was due to "some deeply held convictions about the nature of the public."<sup>32</sup> He went on to explain the nature of those convictions:

In "the nation with the soul of a church" the public school had taken on a sacral character. And thus the defense of public education became an exercise in political ecclesiology. This interpretation helps to explain the devout tone so evident in their protective praising of the public school, and the absoluteness with which they rejected any hint of state grants for parochial schools. By its very nature as a "sectarian" institution, the Catholic school was ill-equipped to pass on the public faith, fully and freely expressed, to the coming generation.<sup>33</sup>

I should call your attention to an expression I believe is peculiar to the United States – "public" schools, meant to describe what other countries more accurately classify as "state" or "government" schools. Furthermore, let me underscore the purpose of American "public" schools – the production of a generation thinking in accord with national goals and values, and the same can be asserted, I believe, for all state-sponsored educational institutions throughout the world. This is not necessarily a bad purpose, but one which should give freedom-loving people pause. Very simply put, it is as dangerous for governments to run schools as it is for them to run churches since both – necessarily – involve the forming of men's minds and hearts. Thus Samuel Blumenfeld comments: "The Catholics were aware enough to see what it would all lead to and bolted the public school rather than accept the destruction of their faith."<sup>34</sup>

I used the word "counter-cultural" earlier and want to emphasize the importance of that concept; the best example of how a counter-cultural education in Catholic schools has affected the social structure of America is clearly seen in the strength and youthfulness of the pro-life movement. A few days after our annual March for Life (which occurs in January in Washington, D. C., usually in bitterly cold weather), a journalist in favour of "abortion rights" wrote an article in the *Washington Post* (also strongly pro-abortion) noting that he was "expecting to write about [the March's] irrelevance," however, he indicated: "I was especially struck by the large number of young people among the tens of thousands at the march." He highlighted the fact that the vast majority came from Catholic schools who

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<sup>30</sup> Sizer, *Education and Assimilation*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> E. Gaustad (1974). *A Religious History of America*. New York: Harper and Row, 213.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Lynn (1970). *The Eclipse of a Public, Theology and Church in Times of Change*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 199.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> S. L. Blumenfeld (1981). *Is Public Education Necessary?* Old Greenwich, Connecticut: Devin-Adair Co., 248.



“were taught from an early age to oppose abortion.” The piece ended up being remarkably fair and even positive.<sup>35</sup>

I maintain, without fear of contradiction, that without the Catholic schools there would have been no serious pro-life movement in the United States. Why? Because the government schools begin their indoctrination programs in the earliest years of elementary school and thus create a cadre of youth in their own “image and likeness.” The Catholic schools also pass on a value system from the earliest years, but from a Gospel perspective. Anecdotally, I should observe that in my many years of teaching theology at the university level, I never encountered a female graduate of a Catholic secondary school who advanced the abortion agenda and, conversely, never encountered a female graduate of a state secondary school who was anything but virulently pro-abortion.

A major and persistent objection to religiously oriented schools is the charge of fostering “sectarianism.” Objective research, however, disproves that allegation: “There is no evidence of Catholic schools being divisive. On the contrary, those who attend them seem to be more supportive of racial integration and have a higher level of ‘social consciousness’ than those who do not attend Catholic schools.”<sup>36</sup> Pope Benedict XVI responded to this accusation and turned it around in his address to the bishops of Scotland during their *ad limina* visit: “You can be proud of the contribution made by Scotland’s Catholic schools in overcoming sectarianism and building good relations between communities,” he said. “Faith schools are a powerful force for social cohesion, and when the occasion arises, you do well to underline this point.” Catholic schools produce “articulate and well-informed” followers capable of taking part in the highest levels of Scottish public life. He went on: “A strong Catholic presence in the media, local and national politics, the judiciary, the professions and the universities can only serve to enrich Scotland’s national life, as people of faith bear witness to the truth, especially when that truth is called into question.” He also connected Catholic schools with the much-needed effort of the bishops to combat what he called “the increasing tide of secularism” in Scotland.<sup>37</sup>

The value of a total education in a religious ambience has become increasingly appreciated in American society. Whereas such a conviction was almost uniquely Catholic fifty years ago, now it is not uncommon to hear strong support for this position coming from Evangelicals and even Reform (that is, liberal) Jews. Rabbi Jacob Neusner asked, “without institutions and organizations to give direction and substance to the life of such groups, what is left but inchoate sentiment?”<sup>38</sup> Surely this is what was meant by the assertion that Hebrew day schools are necessary for “a truly meaningful Jewish community in America.”<sup>39</sup>

#### IV. Some Concluding Thoughts

At the outset of this perhaps overly long discourse, I said that I wanted to use the American reality as a kind of template for a much greater reality. I hope I have shown how the Church in the United States responded to an anti-Catholic threat by fashioning her own school system and how that school system has served both the Church and the broader society very well. The secularization taking Europe by storm and menacing the United States to a

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<sup>35</sup> R. McCartney (2010). *Young Activists Adding Fuel to Anti-abortion Side*, 24 January Washington.

<sup>36</sup> A. Greeley (1977). *An Ugly Little Secret*. Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 185.

<sup>37</sup> Pope Says Separate Catholic Schools Help Combat Sectarianism, *Times*, 6 February 2010.

<sup>38</sup> J. Neusner (1980). How Should Jews Vote? in *National Review* 32, 17 October 1980, 1252.

<sup>39</sup> A. Taft (1981). Day Schools Are Key to Survival, Rabbi Says, *Miami Herald*, 3 April 1981, E5.



lesser but nonetheless problematic degree can only be held off and even reversed if the Church is able to offer her members an alternative vision of life and what sociologists call a viable “sub-culture.” In essence, that is what St. Benedict did as the decadent Roman culture was breathing its last, and that alternate vision saved not only the Church but western culture. The principal agent of that renewal was a monasticism, which founded schools everywhere. What emerged in relatively short order was the glorious Middle Ages – the Age of Faith – with the good, the true and the beautiful producing a superabundance of magnificent works of literature, art, music and architecture.

Believers need to be convinced – and then need to convince everyone else – that the Fathers of Vatican II got it right when they declared in *Gaudium et Spes*: “Without the Creator, the creature vanishes” (n. 36). History supports that assertion. Just look at the bloodshed of every godless movement of modernity from the French Revolution to the Mexican Revolution and the Spanish Civil War to the murderous campaigns of the Nazis and Communists. Clearly, “without the Creator, the creature vanishes.”

An education devoid of God is an anti-education. Let me conclude with some very insightful observations of the convert-monk and poet of the twentieth century, Thomas Merton. Reflecting on some years of his boyhood spent in France between the two world wars, he contrasted a state school in the village with a Catholic one:

When I think of the Catholic parents who sent their children to a school like that, I begin to wonder what was wrong with their heads. Down by the river, in a big clean white building, was a college run by the Marist Fathers. I had never been inside it: indeed, it was so clean that it frightened me. But I knew a couple of boys who went to it. They were sons of the little lady who ran the pastry shop opposite the church at St. Antonin and I remember them as exceptionally nice fellows, very pleasant and good. It never occurred to anyone to despise them for being pious. And how unlike the products of the Lycée they were!

When I reflect on all this, I am overwhelmed at the thought of the tremendous weight of moral responsibility that Catholic parents accumulate upon their shoulders by not sending their children to Catholic schools. Those who are not of the Church have no understanding of this. They cannot be expected to. As far as they can see, all this insistence on Catholic schools is only a money-making device by which the Church is trying to increase its domination over the minds of men, and its own temporal prosperity. And of course most non-Catholics imagine that the Church is immensely rich, and that all Catholic institutions make money hand over fist, and that all that money is stored away somewhere to buy gold and silver dishes for the Pope and cigars for the College of Cardinals.

Is it any wonder that there can be no peace in a world where everything possible is being done to guarantee that the youth of every nation will grow up absolutely without moral and religious discipline, and without the shadow of an interior life, or of that spirituality and charity and faith which alone can safeguard the treaties and agreements made by governments?

And Catholics, thousands of Catholics everywhere, have the consummate audacity to weep and complain because God does not hear



their prayers for peace, when they have neglected not only His will, but the ordinary dictates of natural reason and prudence, and let their children grow up according to the standards of a civilization of hyenas.<sup>40</sup>

May I encourage you, no beg you, not to allow another generation to grow up “according to the standards of a civilization of hyenas.”

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas Merton (1998). *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 56.



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