

# CURRICULUM IN CONTEXT:

## THE CHANGING CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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*Changing social context and changing curriculum have brought the parochial and the public schools closer together over the past century and a half.*

**C**ATHOLIC schools and their attendant, special curricula developed concurrently with the heavy immigration of Irish, German, Italian, and Polish Catholics to the United States between 1800 and 1930. By 1840, 200 Catholic schools sat close to public school counterparts in most major cities. One hundred and twenty-four years later, in 1964, 5.6 million children were enrolled in over 2,000 Catholic schools. Recently, a downward trend, which is likely to continue, has reduced Catholic school enrollment to approximately 4 million (3).

The curriculum common to most Catholic schools in the first 100 years of their existence was directly related to the religious and cultural basis for the school's establishment.

### **The Religious Context of the Curriculum**

Put simply, one major rationale for the establishment of a separate Catholic school system was "to save souls" (1). This simple rationale had a direct impact on the curriculum: teach the catechism. In most schools the catechism was the central cur-

ricular agent of religious instruction. This small, usually red or blue book, summarized the religious doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church and invariably used the question and answer mode of instruction. This writer can remember the daily ritual of snapping to attention when called upon to answer such questions as "Who is God?" or "Why did God make me?"

This system of instruction was based upon rote learning and, while the questions stayed the same from year to year, the answers became increasingly sophisticated. An hour or more a day, five days a week, was given over to this process of one student at a time responding to a question asked by the teacher, a nun, or a priest.

This component of the Catholic school curriculum was powerfully supported by parents. In the national study of Catholic schools done in 1964 parents assigned the highest importance to teaching children to know about God, Christ, and the Church; 96.8 percent of the sample thought this goal was central to the Catholic schools (4).

Not only did parents value the religious curriculum, the hierarchy demanded it. In 1829, again in 1852 and 1866, and finally in 1884, the American Bishops gathered in

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Baltimore to underscore the importance of a separate Catholic school system with a special curriculum. The Church leaders had as a major goal the protection of the young against a hostile, sectarian (Protestant) public school system and the preservation of the faith (1).

With leaders demanding a strong, if defensive, religious component in the curriculum, and parents supporting such a course, religious instructors calculated to "arm" the student with quick right answers in a hostile host culture. This style of instruction thrived in Catholic schools.

### **The Social Dimension of the Curriculum**

The early American Catholic church was made up of an immigrant people placed into a country hostile to its religion and culture (2). Catholic schools became a haven for the maintenance of not only religious but cultural solidarity. The reality of the Catholic school as a cultural and social haven also had curricular manifestations.

Many Catholic schools were bilingual. Until recently one dominant pattern in the establishment of parishes (local church units) in the United States was national. That is, Italians would have their church and school, Germans would have theirs, and the Poles still a third church and school. Typically, the nuns who staffed these schools

shared the national origin of the parish and spoke both English and the native tongue. As much as one half of every school day would be conducted in the native language. For a personal example, my father, educated in Huntington, Indiana, in the first quarter of the 20th century, was taught science, math, and religion in German and said all prayers (four times a day) in both languages.

A second more pervasive impact on the curriculum flowing from the concept of Catholic schools as cultural havens was the great emphasis on classroom discipline and rote learning. Catholic teachers were either trained in Europe or trained using the European model. Moreover, the several European cultures represented in the immigration to America had as part of their cultural makeup stern expectations of children in the presence of religious people (nuns and priests). The religious teachers were to be respected and obeyed for two powerful reasons: (a) they represented adult authority (a substitute parent), and (b) they represented spiritual authority (the hand of God).

The curricular results of both the European rote model for learning and the tremendous respect for religious authority held by the immigrant population were pervasive. Classroom mood, questioning technique, recitation habits, student-teacher interaction, and the uses of instructional materials were all set, and kept for over 100 years in many cases, in large part by the cultural values

conservatively clung to by the immigrant population. This provided them with a home away from home, a haven in the United States.

## Changing Context and Changing Curriculum

With the Second Vatican Council in 1962 and the nearly complete acculturation of Catholic Americans, the two goals which had served as underpinnings for Catholic schools lost the capacity to motivate leaders and parents to form a consensus to shape the curriculum.

Writing about the impact of Vatican II, Mary Perkins Ryan indicates that Catholics no longer lived in fear or distrust of or indifference to their non-Catholic neighbors. She urged Catholics to look for what they had in common and to work with non-Catholics in pursuit of common goals. Finally, Ryan outlined two ways of looking at Catholic schools: (a) The Siege Mentality, which held defensively with the cultural solidarity of the immigrant church; and (b) The Climate of Openness, which sought to reduce the differences and give up the old ways of emphasizing the differences between the Catholic schools and their public counterparts (5).

Another force highly related to Vatican II was also at work and would ultimately have a significant impact on Catholic school curricula. One hundred and forty years of living in America had changed the immigrant people who embraced a "foreign" religion and culture to a highly diversified group of Catholic Americans. The American Catholics of yesterday had become today's Catholic Americans. According to John D. Donovan, what was a noun had become an adjective; what was an adjective had become a noun. Clearly by the end of the Second World War the immigrant Catholics from Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Germany had been acculturated and assimilated into the mainstream of American life. The social, religious, and educational consequences were great (1).

Factors other than the broad sweeps of Vatican II and acculturation made the curricular changes of the mid-twentieth century

a reality. A sharp reduction in the number of religious teachers to staff the schools placed curricular development and implementation in the hands of non-religious (lay) teachers. Second, Catholic school administrators and leaders began to seek federal and state monies to support the schools. Both factors (loss of teaching nuns and pursuit of public monies) teamed with the social phenomena of acculturation and the events of Vatican II to change dramatically the curricula of most Catholic schools.

The results of the several forces at work for over 150 years are best reviewed as a Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis. The public schools which were available to immigrant Catholics were viewed as "too Protestant" for their liking. Consequently they developed their own set of schools of the early and mid-nineteenth century. Historical forces have altered both school systems. The public school curriculum has been secularized by custom and law, and the Catholic schools' curriculum has lost its "immigrant" status.

A period of nearly 150 years has produced an almost common curriculum among Catholic and public schools. Certainly there are still religion classes held in Catholic schools, and this is different from the public school system. But the pervasive social underpinnings for both systems seem to be nearly identical now, and the curricula which stems from their shared basic values will probably continue to look more and more alike.

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