



# Can Catholic Schools Be Saved?

By Peter Meyer

*Lacking nuns and often students, a shrinking system looks for answers*

Bobby and I stood outside the small public elementary school that our children attended, pondering our respective 1st graders' prospects. The weeds poked up through the asphalt, the windows on the 30-year-old building were dirty, the playground equipment was rotting. Inside the K–2 school, some 600 kids were being prepared for academic underachievement: in a few more years two-thirds of them would be unable to read at grade level.

*"Nothing wrong with this place," Bobby finally said, "that a busload of nuns wouldn't solve."*

I laughed. I knew exactly what he meant. We grew up on opposite sides of the country (he in New York and I in Oregon), but we both grew up Catholic, in the '50s, and that meant one thing if nothing else: nuns.

The guardians of moral order and academic achievement for several generations of Catholic boys and girls, these robed religious women ruled with—well, with rulers. And paddles. And, sometimes, fists. Before "tough love" there was Sister Patrick Mary or Sister Elizabeth Maureen. Before No Child Left Behind there were behinds burnished by a swift kick from a foot that emerged without warning from under several acres of robes.

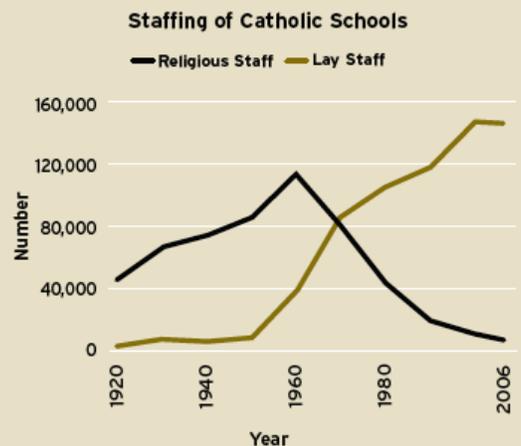
Indeed, our childhood memories, different in detail, were singular in their moral clarity: we knew what a busload of nuns could do. They would march up and down the aisles. (Yes, there would be aisles, in a room filled with 30 to 50 kids—phooey on class size.) And with a glance from behind their starched white wimples, we would learn.

The problem is that there no longer are busloads of nuns; in fact, most schools would be lucky to have a Mini Cooper's worth of such minimum-wage professional teachers. Their ranks have declined by a staggering 62 percent since 1965 (from 180,000 to 68,000). The staff composition of Catholic schools has similarly been turned on its head, from some 90 percent female religious in the '50s to less than 5 percent today (see Figure 1). "The school system had literally been built on their backs," reported Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland in their 1992 study *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, "through the services they contributed in the form of the very low salaries that they accepted." Consequently, costs have soared; average annual tuition has gone from next to nothing to more than \$2,400 in elementary schools and almost \$6,000 in high schools.

Despite a growing Catholic population (from 45 million in 1965 to almost 77 million today, making it the largest Christian denomination in the United States), Catholic

## Losing Religion? (Figure 1)

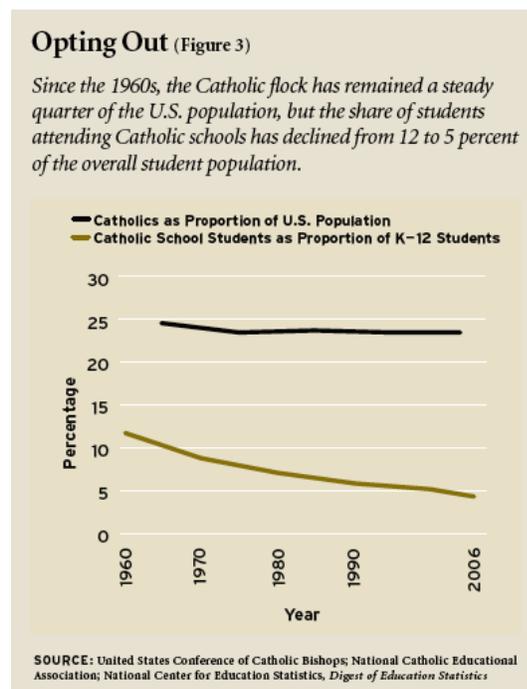
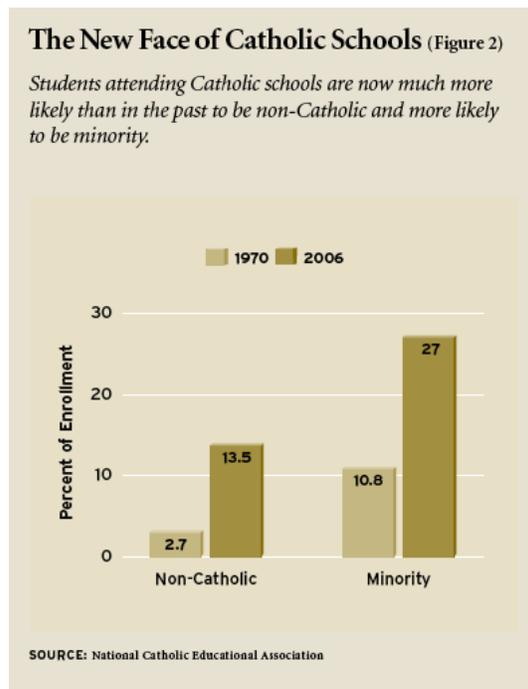
*The staff composition of Catholic schools has changed dramatically since 1920. Laypeople now comprise more than 95 percent of all Catholic-school employees.*



SOURCE: National Catholic Educational Association

school enrollment has plummeted, from 5.2 million students in nearly 13,000 schools in 1960 to 2.5 million in 9,000 schools in 1990. After a promising increase in the late 1990s, enrollment had by 2006 dropped to 2.3 million students in 7,500 schools. And the steep decline would have been even steeper if these sectarian schools had to rely on their own flock for enrollment: almost 14 percent of Catholic school enrollment is now non-Catholic, up from less than 3 percent in 1970 (see Figure 2). When Catholic schools educated 12 percent of all schoolchildren in the United States, in 1965, the proportion of Catholics in the general population was 24 percent. Catholics still make up about one-quarter of the American population, but their schools enroll less than 5 percent of all students (see Figure 3).

What happened to the Catholics? What happened to a school system that at one time educated one of every eight American children? And did it quite well.



## MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE!

As most educators know, Catholic schools work and have worked for a long time. Sociologist James Coleman and colleagues Thomas Hoffer and Sally Kilgore, in 1982, were among the first to document Catholic schools' academic successes, in *High School Achievement: Public and Private Schools*. A variety of studies since, by scholars at the University of Chicago, Northwestern, the Brookings Institution, and Harvard, have all supported the conclusion that Catholic schools do a better job educating children, especially the poor and minorities, than public schools.

According to the *Common Good* authors, Catholic high schools—and many believe that this applies to elementary schools as well—“manage simultaneously to achieve relatively high levels of student learning, distribute this learning more equitably with regard to race and class than in the public sector, and sustain high levels of teacher commitment and student engagement.” One of the keys, they concluded, is the organization of Catholic schools. Parochial schools are less likely to fall into the public-school habit of “structuring inequities”: public schools offer students the chance to take weaker academic courses while Catholic school courses are “largely determined by the school.” The irony, say Bryk et al., is that such a “constrained academic structure”

contributes more to “the common school effect” than the potluck served by the public schools. Catholic schools give less weight to “background differences” of their students and thus do not allow those background differences to be “transformed into achievement differences.” Even after adjusting for student background differences, Bryk and his colleagues found significant “school effects” on academic achievement.

“You know the story about the kid whose parents got fed up with their son’s constant discipline problems in the public school?” asked James Goodness, communications director of Newark Catholic Schools, while entertaining journalists at a recent archdiocesan-sponsored luncheon. Newark, the tenth-largest parochial district in the country, closed nine elementary and two secondary schools in 2005, with a corresponding enrollment decline of 5 percent, from some 47,300 to 44,750 students. Goodness, with his story about the problem public-school boy, was explaining what made Catholic schools special. “That’s it!” says the dad. ‘It’s Catholic school for you.’ They sent him. They waited. No calls from school. ‘What’s up?’ the dad finally asks. ‘The nuns been boxin’ your ears?’ ‘No,’ says the kid. ‘They didn’t have to. When I got to school, I saw this guy hanging from a cross with nails in his hands and feet and I figured they meant business.’”

What Catholic schools are very good at, it seems, is getting kids’ attention. No surprise to those of us who grew up in them. The establishment of order and discipline, in all things: We wore uniforms. We had homework. We had to eat our lunch, even the peas and carrots. My wife remembers classmates having to put a nickel in the “mission box” if they mispronounced a word—“libary” instead of library or “pitcher” instead of picture—at her Jersey City parochial grade school. Grammar counted. Posture counted. So did skirt length. It was all for the greater glory of God, of course. By reaching for God, the “all-knowing,” so the nuns said, we might know something even if our reach fell short. There were no prizes for just showing up. All of it, we knew, on some preternatural level, made us “better.” And the research seems to support that view. In fact, one of the “surprises” for the *Common Good* researchers, who deemed Catholic schools’ academic focus both consistent and laudable, was that the schools seemed to succeed even when the teaching and the curriculum were “ordinary.”

Such Catholic rigor was part missionary zeal—to spread “the word”—and part defense against the encroachments of an increasingly secular world. And secular, for Catholics, meant a certain slackness in moral and academic discipline. In the United States, the so-called “wall of separation” between church and state, between order and freedom, eventually forced Catholics to build their own school system, the only country in the world where they have one (see sidebar). The battles to safeguard order, and academic excellence, were fought early and often. At the turn of the 20th century, for example, Catholic school leaders refused to follow their public school counterparts into a vocational and utilitarian tracking system. “Catholic youth should not be the ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water,’ but should be prepared for the professions or mercantile pursuits,” went one early protestation by the Association of Catholic Colleges.

Catholic schools toyed with progressive education models in the 1970s, but gave it up, report the authors of the *Common Good*, when they realized they could not be all things to all children. Catholic high schools soon “returned to conventional class-period organization, heightened academic standards and a renewed emphasis on a core of academic subjects.”

## **EVERYTHING BUT A PLAGUE OF LOCUSTS**

So, if they are so good, why are Catholic schools disappearing? And if there are so many more Catholics, why are there fewer schools? No more nuns? No more money? Charter schools? Loss of faith? Indolence? Scandal? Irrelevance? The answer seems to be all of that—and less.

"The answer is fairly simple," says James Cultrara, director for education for the New York State Catholic Conference. "The rising cost of providing a Catholic education has made it more difficult for parents to meet those rising costs."

The Catholic-school story has been covered, as education journalist Samuel Freedman wrote in the *New York Times*, "as either a sob story or a sort of natural disaster, the inevitable outcome of demographics." But Freedman believes that "there need not have been anything inevitable about the closings," especially since Catholic populations are increasing.

Brooklyn closed 26 elementary schools in 2005, even though its Catholic population has grown by some 600,000 since 1950. "But the other trends were unmistakable," says Thomas Chadzutko, superintendent of the diocese's schools, and the man who presided over the closings. "Enrollment was down and expenses up."

If only it were that simple.

The loss of nuns has undoubtedly added to the financial burden. But demographic change, and the failure to respond to it, has created other burdens. Since the Catholic school "system" is actually a loose and quite decentralized confederation of 7,500 schools supported, for the most part, by 19,000 parishes in more than 150 dioceses, it took "the Church" some time to see the trends, much less develop new strategies to respond to them.

"We have a system of schools, not a school system," explains Newark's new vicar for education, Father Kevin Hanbury. "The local parishes traditionally have been responsible for the schools." Those parishes, and their schools, feel change at the local, neighborhood level quite quickly. But it takes time for the huge, theologically monolithic, and institutionally undemocratic Church to react.

The flight from inner cities to the suburbs by working- and middle-class Americans affected Catholic schools as much as, if not more than, it did public schools. Downtown churches were suddenly filled by poor immigrants from Catholic nations (Latin America and the Caribbean) without a tradition of Catholic schools, much less a habit of paying for them. According to the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), between 2000 and 2006, nearly 600 Catholic elementary and secondary schools closed, a 7 percent decline, and nearly 290,000 students left, almost 11 percent. The largest declines were among elementary schools in 12 urban dioceses (New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Brooklyn, Cleveland, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Boston, Newark, Detroit, and Miami), which together have lost almost 20 percent of their students (more than 136,000) in the last five years.

One factor is that the public schools in the suburbs are not like the public schools that Catholics tried to avoid in the cities. "Folks got to the suburbs and discovered that it was not only very expensive to build new schools, but that the public schools were not that bad," says Patrick Wolf, professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas.

And charter schools, says Father Ronald Nuzzi, director of the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) leadership program at Notre Dame, "are one of the biggest threats to Catholic schools in the inner city, hands down. How do you compete with an alternative that doesn't cost anything?"

Ron Zimmer, of the RAND Corporation, and two colleagues studied the impact of charters in Michigan, one of the most chartered states in the nation, and determined that private schools were taking as big a hit as traditional public schools because of charters. "Private schools will lose one student for every three students gained in the charter schools," they wrote. This had, they said, "not only...a statistically significant effect on private schools but an effect that is economically meaningful."

And then came the sex abuse scandals. There has been nothing quite so shattering as the endless parade of headlines about priests abusing children. The Louisville Archdiocese was hit with almost 200 sex abuse suits in a single six-month period in 2003. In April of that year, the Boston Archdiocese revealed that it carried a \$46 million deficit, “the largest any diocese has ever had,” according to the *New York Times*, because it had paid out more than \$150 million in legal settlements in sex abuse cases. The crisis in Boston was heightened, said Cardinal Sean O’Malley, because parish donations fell off by several million dollars as a result of the scandal. The diocese closed more than 60 parishes, and dozens of parish schools. A Gallup survey in 2003 found that one in four Catholics withheld donations to the Church because of the scandal. Four dioceses, of the 195 administrative units in the American Catholic church—Davenport, Iowa; Portland, Oregon; Spokane, Washington; and Tucson, Arizona—have already declared bankruptcy because of lawsuits over sex abuse. Others, like Boston, are on the brink.

## MARKETING FOR MIRACLES

“The world changed” was a common refrain of Catholic educators with whom I spoke over several months of research. And it was clear that they included the Catholic world in that assessment. Faith, on many levels, has been shaken. The “new reality,” says Samuel Freedman of the *Times*, is that Catholic schools “will have to become expert fundraisers to survive.” And marketers. And promoters. And lobbyists. And miracle workers. Catholics are scrambling to find their footing in a world of charters, vouchers, and tax credits.



### CATHOLIC SCHOOL HISTORY LESSON

Spanish and French colonists brought schools (which were Catholic) with them to the New World in the 1600s. There were parochial primary schools in Pennsylvania in the 1700s. The first “female academy” in America was in New Orleans, established by the Ursuline Sisters from France in 1727.

Catholic schools in those days were often supported by public funds. St. Peter’s in New York City applied for and received state aid in 1806, as did St. Patrick’s in 1816. Catholic schools continued to receive public monies in Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Connecticut, and New Jersey almost to the end of the 19th century. New York State did not outlaw the practice until 1898.

Catholics perceived “public school” as not just a threat to Catholics, but, as the 1917 *Catholic Encyclopedia* (CE) recounts, an “imminent danger to faith and morals.” And in that threat was born the modern Catholic school system, as Catholic bishops convened in Baltimore in 1884 and ordered each parish to build a school and each Catholic kid to enroll. Between 1880 and 1900, as the immigrants began arriving, the number of students in Catholic schools more than doubled.

“The vastness of the system,” the CE reported at the turn of the 20th century, “may be gauged by the fact that it comprises over 20,000 teachers, over 1,000,000 pupils, represents \$100,000,000 worth of property; and costs over \$15,000,000 annually.” The Church saw its “missionary” duty to educate the new immigrants and in 1910, Catholics counted 293 Polish, 161 French, and 48 Italian

schools, and a smattering of Slovak and Lithuanian schools. But the “vastness” now represented such a threat to the secular system that some considered Catholic schools “a destroyer of American Patriotism,” and John Dewey pronounced the church “inimical to democracy.” Many states simply outlawed Catholic schools. It took a Supreme court decision, in 1925, *Pierce v. The*

*Society of Sisters*, to declare unconstitutional an Oregon law that required *public school* attendance. The Catholic “system” continued to grow and by 1965, a stunning 12 percent of all elementary and secondary students in the United States were enrolled in Catholic schools.

Then came sex, drugs, rock ‘n roll—and Vatican II. The conclave of the world’s Catholic bishops and cardinals called to order in 1962 by a cherubic old pontiff, John XXIII, turned the Church on its head at a time when the Beatles, Martin Luther King, and the Weather Underground were shaking civil and social foundations to their core. Swept away were the Latin Mass, the Baltimore Catechism, meatless Fridays, the high priest at an altar with his back to his congregation.

Not only are the nuns and priests now gone, but so too is a Catholic culture that for 100 years produced nuns and priests with faithful regularity. Of course, the debate as to whether the demise of Catholic didacticism and marshal order has been good or bad still roils Church waters. But the fact remains that the American Catholic school system isn’t what it used to be.

—Peter Meyer

The Brooklyn diocese has hired a marketing firm. In Newark one of the first things Father Kevin Hanbury did when he was made vicar of education last year, before he hired a full-time marketing director, was host a white linen luncheon for the local media. “We have a story to tell,” says Hanbury, “and we want to get it as close to page 1 as we can.” The story, as Hanbury and other Catholic leaders tell it, is that Catholic schools not only work, but they are good for America. “Many of our schools are majority non-Catholic,” says Karen Ristau, president of the NCEA. Ristau herself, a laywoman, represents a new, and some would say sobered, Church. She has an armful of academic credentials, but is also a grandmother. “We have high expectations for these little kiddos,” she says, speaking of the 2-million-plus children in the Catholic school system that NCEA represents.

After I called the Memphis diocese to inquire about Catholic schools there, a FEDEX truck was at my door the next morning, with a package of press clips, brochures, and a CD. “Let me tell you this story,” says a soft-spoken Mary McDonald, superintendent of Memphis Catholic Schools, also a grandmother. Though McDonald can now describe her first days on the job as superintendent in July of 1998 with some bemusement, when she received orders from her new boss, Bishop J. Terry Steib, to reopen *already closed* Catholic schools in downtown Memphis, she thought she’d been sent to hell.

Memphis was a sprawling Catholic diocese that had seen the number of its faithful increase by half, but its school enrollment decrease by almost a quarter. While there were new Catholic schools and Catholic schools with waiting lists in the suburbs, inner-city Memphis had become increasingly black and poor and non-Catholic. A half-dozen Catholic schools had closed over the previous two decades. The few schools that remained were in the death grip of aging parish populations, increased costs (the number of nuns in Memphis had dropped from 160 to 80), and dwindling enrollment.

No wonder “the Bishop’s vision,” as she calls it, sent McDonald right to the diocesan chapel and onto her knees. It didn’t seem to matter to Bishop Steib that McDonald, a teacher and school principal during her 30 years in education, had never been a superintendent. “It was daunting,” she recalls. “I just went out and started talking to anyone who would listen—and even those who didn’t want to—about the value of and need for Catholic schools.” And it didn’t matter that the people in those slums where the empty schools were weren’t Catholic, says McDonald, who often quotes a line attributed to Cardinal James Hickey of Washington, D.C., which has become a call to arms in the new crusade to save Catholic education: “We don’t educate these children because *they* are Catholic, but because *we* are Catholic.”

A year after McDonald started beating the bushes of Memphis for money, on a July day in 1999, her phone rang. The call was from someone offering “a multimillion-dollar donation,” says McDonald, who told the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* at the time, “I know a miracle when I see one.” Though the donors—there were more than one—remain anonymous to this day, their \$15 million “was earmarked for Catholic education,” says McDonald, recounting the story seven years later, as if she still can’t believe it. “And they weren’t even Catholic.”

McDonald and her staff reopened St. Augustine, a 65-year-old school that had closed in 1995, within three weeks of receiving the donation. McDonald had 20 students registered in three days. The school opened with 30 students in two kindergarten classes. The students didn’t need to have the \$2,400 tuition—the donation paid for scholarships—and they didn’t need to be Catholic.

“But the schools are truly Catholic,” says McDonald. “We’re not a public school. We’re not a charter. We have the same values we’ve had for centuries—do the same things. We say prayer every day. We say the rosary at the same time every week. We have Mass for everyone.” And uniforms, of course. “Our donors believed that Catholic education could make a difference,” says McDonald, “and that Catholic schools are successful in inner cities.” Within the next six years, eight more schools reopened, adding more than 1,300 students to the Jubilee School system, the name of the new initiative. Almost 90 percent of the students lived at or below the poverty level; over 80 percent were non-Catholic.

Has all the change and consolidation affected academics? No, says McDonald. Jubilee students are reading at grade level within a year of arriving; they are then outperforming their peers on standardized TerraNova tests. So far, none of the Jubilee students are old enough to have entered high school, but McDonald is optimistic. “We have a 99.9 percent graduation rate in our six high schools. Virtually no one drops out.”

## **CAPITAL CAMPAIGNS AND A VOUCHER IN EVERY POT**

A half-dozen years earlier in Washington, D.C., Cardinal Hickey had appointed a commission to study the problems confronting his diocese’s inner-city schools. “The commission recommended closing 12 of 16 struggling schools,” recalls Juana Brown, who was then the principal of one of those schools, Sacred Heart. Hickey issued his now-famous dictum: “Closing schools is not an option.” He ordered the group back to the drawing board.

When it returned, Hickey’s commission proposed creation of Faith in the City, an outreach and fundraising initiative that included a Center City Consortium (CCC). The task for CCC was solving the mystery of the less-than-holy trinity of modern Catholic education: financial distress, declining enrollment, and falling test scores.

This was the same mystery, on a smaller scale, that Mary McDonald was tackling in Memphis. Though details differed, the “can’t fail” spirit has marked both enterprises and made them models for Catholic school rescue and reform.

“I tried to get people to look at Memphis,” recalls George Loney, who directed Dayton’s Catholic Urban Presence program, launched in 2002 to find a solution to that city’s Catholic school crisis. Loney did help Dayton’s Catholic schools, part of the Cincinnati Archdiocese, achieve “needed economies of scale” by consolidating. And test results are good. “I just can’t get them to publicize them,” he says.

The D.C. archdiocese announced in December of 2006 that it would close—“we prefer to say consolidate,” says communications director Susan Gibbs—three elementary schools in the District. Yet the CCC schools seem to be working. Martin Davis of the Fordham Foundation writes that the 13 consortium schools achieved “remarkable growth” in grades 2 through 8 proficiency

rates on the TerraNova from 2000 to 2005. "More remarkable," writes Davis, "those growth rates include test scores from 2004–05, when 300 high-poverty children from failing District of Columbia public schools entered consortium schools through the new D.C. voucher program."

In fact, vouchers are proving to be something of an antidote to the threat posed by charter schools. In Milwaukee, for example, according to Paul Peterson, while charters have "accelerated" the decline of private schools, vouchers seem to have "stabilized" them. Catholic schools in the city have been, since 1996, among the many private schools to benefit from the first state-supported voucher program. In 2005, each of the some 14,000 vouchers passed out in Milwaukee was worth \$5,943 at any one of 117 eligible schools, 35 of them Catholic. (The 45 charters in the city, allowed since 1993, received between \$7,000 and \$9,000 per student.) The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* concluded in 2005 that "the principal effect of choice" in the city has been "to preserve the city's private schools, many of them Lutheran and Catholic."

David Prothero, associate superintendent of schools for the archdiocese, says the 6,000 Catholic-school voucher students represent nearly half of Milwaukee's Catholic school students. "That's significant."

"The irony is that the research shows that private schools don't make a big difference for high socioeconomic students," says Patrick Wolf, author of a recent study on voucher impacts in Washington, DC. "But they do make a difference for low-income students. And they're the ones who can't afford them."

"From a lawmaker's point of view," says Jim Cultrara, who is also co-chairman of the New York State Coalition of Independent and Religious Schools and spearheaded a serious, though unsuccessful, effort to have the New York State Legislature pass a tax credit in 2006, "it's fiscally prudent to provide financial assistance to enroll children in independent and religious schools. It helps reduce the tax burden and alleviate overcrowding in public schools. And that's not even counting the benefit of providing students with a quality education."

Thus, the significance of the scholarship programs and vouchers, and the Church's mission to the poor. The latest NCEA data show the mean tuition and per-pupil cost for Catholic elementary schools to be \$2,607 and \$4,268, and for high schools, \$5,870 and \$7,200, all below average public-school per-pupil expenditures. Thus, too, the persuasiveness of the argument that Catholic schools are a form of subsidy to the nation's public education system. Diane Ravitch wrote, in a *Daily News* editorial after hearing word of the Brooklyn diocese school closings in 2005, "It will be a loss for all New York City. The Catholic schools in this city have provided genuine choice for children from low-income and working-class families for more than 150 years. What is more, they have established a solid reputation for safety, academic standards and moral values. All of this has been supplied at a nominal cost to families and at no cost to taxpayers." The NCEA estimates the value of the Catholic school system's annual subsidy to the nation at \$19.4 billion.

Through smart financial administration and management and aggressive fundraising, many dioceses are beginning to take back some ground lost in the last several decades. Pooling resources for such things as collecting tuition, custodial contracts, and paying salaries has saved money as well as freed principals to focus on academics. Through aggressive marketing and with a corporate board of "the rich and powerful," the D.C. consortium has raised \$30 million in a capital campaign in the last five years. An annual gala fundraiser, co-sponsored by Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and Representative John Boehner (R-OH), last year garnered \$1 million.

"Mr. Boehner has visited every one of our schools," says Brown. "He's 1 of 11 children and grew up Catholic and has been a tremendous booster."

It is probably no coincidence that Kennedy and Boehner were key Capitol Hill strategists in passing the historic No Child Left Behind Act. "Catholics believed in every child learning long before NCLB," says Juana Brown. "We have a mission to educate."

The dust has still not settled in the Church. But the new missionaries, like Brown and McDonald, seem as holy and determined as their habited predecessors. Given the Church's history, one would not want to bet against them, especially on the education front. Can tax credits, vouchers, and fundraisers substitute for the devotions of the faithful? Can marketing directors get those same faithful to forget about the sexual predators? These are serious and still largely unanswered questions. But there is a more vexing concern for some of us, even those of us used to imponderables such as the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin: where do you find a busload of nuns?

*Peter Meyer, former news editor of Life magazine, is a freelance writer.*

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