

# Catholic

## UPDATE

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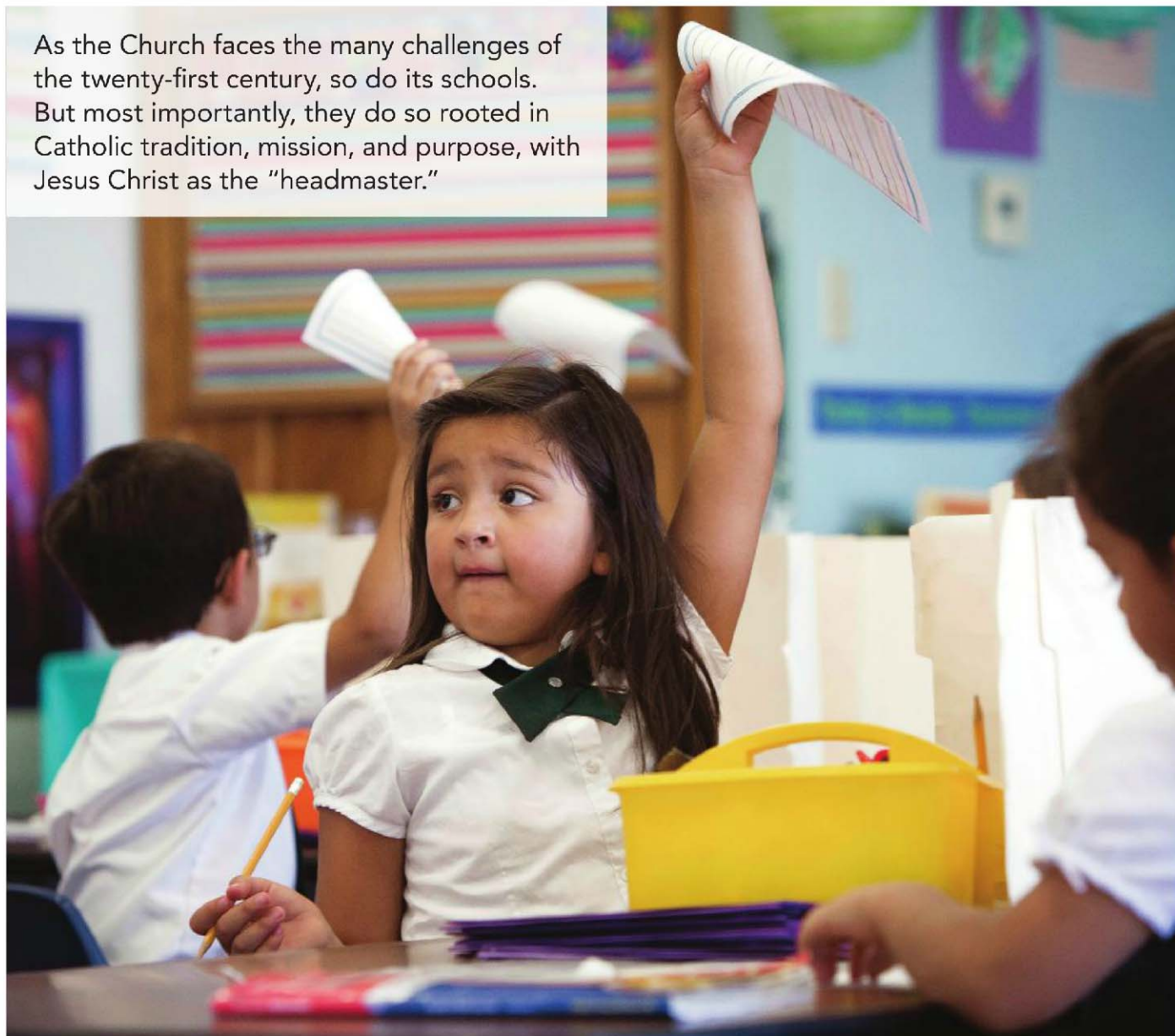
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## Catholic Education EXCELLENT—AND CATHOLIC

EDDIE O'NEILL

As the Church faces the many challenges of the twenty-first century, so do its schools. But most importantly, they do so rooted in Catholic tradition, mission, and purpose, with Jesus Christ as the "headmaster."



CMS PHOTOGRAPHY SERVICES

Now more than ever, Catholic schools need to distinguish themselves from the many educational options, stresses Dominican Sr. John Mary Fleming, executive director of the Secretariat of Catholic Education of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). “You can get a good education in many places,” she says. “However, Catholic education is part of a long history in Western education. We’ve been helping young people understand that school is much more than skills development. For instance, it involves exposure to the true, good, and beautiful in arts, literature, science, mathematics, and history.”

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council’s 1965 Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum Educationis*), the Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education held a global conference to assess the state of Catholic education. Out of this congress came a 2015 document titled *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion* (*Instrumentum Laboris*). It emphatically states, “At the heart of Catholic education, there is always Jesus Christ: everything that happens in Catholic schools and universities should lead to an encounter with the living Christ.”

In preparing for the congress, bishop conferences from around the world were asked to submit a review of Catholic education in their own countries. The USCCB identified four themes of importance that characterize and challenge the current environment of Catholic schools across the US:

1. The funding and governance of Catholic schools
2. Formation of future leaders and teachers
3. Outreach to Latinos and students who live in poverty, and
4. The overall Catholic identity of schools.

Here’s how US Catholic schools and educators are meeting the challenges.



## Affordable for All

Archdioceses constantly hear the lament of parents who want to send their children to Catholic schools but say they can’t afford it. For families who qualify, scholarships and fund-raising efforts are in place that can help offset the cost.

The USCCB noted in its assessment on Catholic education that the middle class—which the bishops said is the backbone of many local parishes—struggled to send their children to Catholic schools. They found that more flexibility and collaboration is needed to help make Catholic schools affordable to all. “Cultivating donors and building a financial foundation of support for Catholic schools will require communication and a creative partnership between the diocese and parishes in order to share the...responsibility...of education,” the bishops stated.

Dioceses like Grand Rapids, MI, have heeded the bishops’ call. Its superintendent of schools, David Faber, and Grand Rapids’ bishop, the Most Rev. David Walkowiak, had tried many traditional fund-raising efforts with little success. Then the diocese developed the bishops’ Catholic School Initiative. It features an innovative concept called the Welcome Scholarship.

“Since we’ve started Welcome Scholarship, we have had two years of enrollment growth after eighteen years of decline,” Faber explains. Who are they welcoming? Families with children who are registered in a parish and who have been away from a Catholic school for at least a year or never attended a Catholic school. In the first two years, the campaign has granted more than 1,000 scholarships. “It is our way to go out and say to the community that they are welcomed here,” adds Faber.

Organizations like the Catholic Schools Foundation (CSF) work to ensure families who wish to send their kids to Catholic schools are able to do so regardless of finances. The CSF offers scholarships for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Most of their students come from low-income, single-parent homes. In one academic year alone, the organization gave 3,800 scholarships, 25 percent of which helped non-Catholics. All of CSF’s high school scholars graduated, and 98 percent were accepted into college.

The executive director of the Archdiocese of Boston’s CSF, Mike Reardon, speaks to how the benefits of scholarships extend beyond students receiving a high-quality, Catholic education. These students are also afforded the opportunity to develop within themselves the social capital and moral compass that they will need in life. “The net effect is that Catholic schools become community anchors, and their students and graduates become community leaders,” Reardon says. His response to the case of affordability is simply: “How can you *not* afford it?”

Thanks to organizations like CSF and funding initiatives like the Welcome Scholarship, a popular misperception that Catholic schools are communities for the well-to-do is shifting.

## Faith-Filled Laity

While the days of Catholic schools being associated with nuns in black habits teaching at the chalkboard of the local parish school are long gone, today’s lay instructors are just as filled with faith. This is imperative because although Catholic schools have evolved with the cultural and demographic landscape of the United States, they are still integral to the foundation of the

Church's mission to preach the gospel.

Holy Family School of Faith in Overland Park, KS, is one of many schools within the Archdiocese of Kansas City that helps teachers get the formation they need to be effective gospel witnesses. This evangelization ministry is in all the schools of Kansas and in the Diocese of Omaha. And they are working in ten parishes in Cincinnati.

At the heart of their apostolate is making missionary disciples. "It starts with a personal relationship with Jesus," notes Dr. Troy Hinkel, executive director of Holy Family. "This is not another program or weekend seminar. We go into a school and ask who wants to learn how to evangelize and disciple other faculty." Then small groups are formed and teachers have a chance to pray together, pray for one another, and share on a regular basis.

All of this is supplemented with a monthly workshop on topics that are more catechetical or doctrinal, explains Hinkel. "Often our Catholic faith is seen as a set of rules to follow, but once the teachers see the real beauty behind the 'Catholic rules,' they want to know more," he explains. He regularly hears teachers say they've returned to the sacraments or Mass at their local parish. "Teachers experience conversions, as do parents and students. They are witnesses of the faith," adds Hinkel.

People who teach in Catholic schools do so because they believe there is something different and good about the school and why it exists, asserts the USCCB Secretariat's Sr. Fleming. "Formation helps to identify that difference from other schools," she explains. "Teachers and administrators in our Catholic schools want more than just skills development. They want to be part of a community of faith. They want to be a part of handing on the faith and forming others to be fully who they were created to be as well."

The USCCB is adamant that formation of school leaders and staff continues to be a priority in each diocese. "We need Catholic educators who are strong leaders committed to Catholic identity and mission...well-formed in faith and morals, active in the faith and involved in parish life," according to *Educating Today and Tomorrow*. "Leaders need to be well-formed and able to teach, govern, recruit and set the tone of the school."



CNS PHOTO

### **Bienvenidos: Striving for Inclusiveness**

Despite the fact that the Latino population is one of the fastest-growing segments of the Catholic Church in the United States, they are the most underserved group in Catholic schools. For close to a decade now, Fr. Joseph Corpora at the University of Notre Dame has been working hard to change that reality. The Holy Cross priest is the director of the Catholic School Advantage Campaign, which strives to make Catholic schools more available, accessible, and affordable to Latinos.

"The Catholic cultural landscape has changed," he says. "We no longer have a German parish on one corner of town and a Polish parish three blocks over. Instead, we have Latinos and other minority groups moving into these urban areas, and Catholic schools are not always sure how to adapt."

The bishops, concerned about this, found a prevailing attitude in some communities reflecting an "us and them" mentality. "Us" being the Anglo-European community and "them" being the Latinos. The USCCB encourages Catholic schools to promote integration and cooperation as they did a century ago when immigrants first arrived from Europe.

Part of Fr. Corpora's ministry has been his work with the Latino Enrollment Institute—a summer program geared toward Catholic school administrators faced with a growing Latino population in their school boundaries. "Many of the schools

## **THE CHURCH'S PATRON SAINTS OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS INCLUDE:**

**St. Joseph Calasanz (1556–1648)**  
**Feast: August 25**

Fr. Joseph felt a particular call to educate poor and homeless children. He and two priests opened a small free school for the poor in Rome. The need for such schools was great, and priests opened more. In 1621, Joseph and his community of teacher priests were recognized and named Clerks Regular of Religious (or the Pious) Schools, also known as Piarists or Scolopi. They operate worldwide.

**St. Ursula (fourth century)**  
**Feast: October 21**

Legend has it that Ursula denounced pagan marriage and traveled in Europe with a group of maidens who were brutally tortured and killed for not renouncing their faith. She is the namesake for the Ursuline order, whose mission is the education of women and girls.

**St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)**  
**Feast: January 28**

Thomas, who taught in Paris and Naples, made his greatest contributions to the Catholic Church with his writings. *Summa Theologica*, his last completed work, addresses the whole of Catholic theology. He stopped work on it in 1273 and said this when asked why he put down his pen: "I cannot go on....All that I have written seems to me like so much straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me."

who attend the institute are in danger of closing,” explains Fr. Corpora. “They’ve lost their numbers and aren’t sure how to increase them despite the fact that there are Hispanic Catholics next door who are eager to be a part of the school.” He adds that simply hiring a bilingual secretary and putting up a “*bienvenidos*” banner outside the parish or school go a long way in presenting a creative, welcoming, and inclusive spirit.

One school that had to face such a change in demographics is Sts. Peter and Paul in the Archdiocese of Omaha. Enrollment at this once-strong Croatian parish had dipped to 140 students. To try to save the 100-year-old inner-city institution, the diocese combined with nearby Assumption-Our Lady of Guadalupe School. In 2013, Sts. Peter and Paul went from having a few Latino students to being more than 90 percent Latino.

“It meant rethinking who we were as a Catholic school,” recalls Cory Sepich, Sts. Peter and Paul principal. “We’ve developed a new mission statement that embraces our past and the changes that have occurred. We have the perfect mission day—May 1, which is the feast day of St. Joseph the Worker, who is a strong saint in the Latino and Croatian communities.” It also meant investing long hours and effort into creating bilingual materials and hiring staff for Latino outreach for the school. Despite the associated challenges, schools like Sts. Peter and Paul have seen the fruits of their labor. “The biggest blessing from the merger has been working with and for our families and helping them make Catholic education affordable. Also, we have seen a community come together through uncertainty and begin to overcome some prejudices and fears,” states Sepich.

### Excellent and Catholic

The USCCB asserts that Catholic schools should become “intentional environments for learning who Jesus is and for deepening the faith lives of parents, teachers, and students in new and unapologetic ways.”

## Prayer for Catholic Schools

O Christ, our Teacher, you invite your faithful people to make disciples in your name and to announce good news to the poor. We thank you for the gift of Catholic schools, where the message of your life, death, and resurrection is proclaimed, Christian community is experienced, service to our brothers and sisters is modeled, and worship of you is cultivated. Increase our zeal for ensuring that all children and families can benefit from a high-quality Catholic education, and that Catholic schools grow in their ability to nurture the soul of our nation. We ask this through the intercession of our Lady, Mother of Catholic Schools. Amen.

SOURCE: ACE.ND.EDU/ADVOCATES/  
TAKE-ACTION/PRAY-FOR-CATHOLIC-SCHOOLS

A diocese in Juneau, AK, shows how dedication to Christ as the “headmaster” makes for an excellent education—solid in Catholic identity. The Juneau Catholic School system serves seventy elementary students at Holy Name Catholic School in Ketchikan. When Nicole Miller became administrator, she could see the Catholic identity was waning, causing the school to lose its focus and mission. Miller notes, “There was a lack of passion. The school was going through the motions of being Catholic.”

To make the school more than just a good private school that said a blessing at lunch, Holy Name instituted a hands-on method of faith formation based on the Montessori method of learning. The program is known as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Program. Unlike book-based curriculums that use a workbook model with minimal teacher training, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd incorporates a dedicated space for

children called the atrium and extensively trained catechists.

Miller recounts her repeated prayer, “OK, God, this is your school not mine, not ours...” and to be open to letting God lead the way. “The catechesis was an effort from us to ensure that our Holy Name children are being introduced and invited to a personal relationship with Christ,” says Miller. It’s working. She says she regularly receives compliments from parents that the kids are happier and there is more joy in the school.

“It’s Christ and his Gospel that create the unique environment of a Catholic school,” Sr. Fleming maintains. “As we move forward, our schools are growing in the mission to be who we say we are as Catholics.” Traditional. Excellent.

*Eddie O’Neill earned a bachelor of arts in media arts from the College of Mass Communications at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. He works as a freelance writer and photojournalist and has received numerous awards. His work has been published in National Catholic Register, The Compass newspaper of the Diocese of Green Bay (WI), Our Sunday Visitor, and Columbia Magazine. He also hosted a regular broadcast on the Relevant Radio network.*

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