



THE RISE OF INDEPENDENT CATHOLIC EDUCATION

A Contemporary Solution for Catholic Families

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Promoting and Defending Faithful Catholic Education

The Cardinal Newman Society's

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The Rise of Independent Catholic Education

Independent Catholic education¹—Catholic, because its schools are committed to Catholic fidelity and formation, yet independent, because they are not owned by a Catholic religious order or diocese—has scarcely caught the attention and admiration of the Church it serves. But for those Catholic families who have benefitted from it, this growing phenomenon is enlightening the minds of children and leading their souls to God.

Independent schools are a relatively new phenomenon in the history of American Catholic education. Even before the parochial school movement of the mid-19th century, Catholic schools were established and operated under the auspices of ecclesial entities, most often religious orders devoted to teaching and evangelization. However, amid the crisis of faith and authority following the Second Vatican Council and the rapid decline in parochial school enrollment since the 1960s, lay Catholics began establishing their own schools. Often these were motivated by a lack of institutional will or ability to open a Catholic school nearby, compromises to faithful teaching and practice at local Catholic schools, or concerns about the cost of parochial education following the abdication of teaching nuns and clergy whose support had made Catholic schools affordable to the lowest-income families. Today several trends are converging to drive the increase in independent Catholic education, including societal changes effected by gender ideology, critical race theory, relativism, and materialism as well as the increased availability of funding through school choice programs.

Lay in Catholic Education

Catholic schools in America were established as early as 1606 by the Franciscans in Florida, followed by others associated with the Spanish missions of the West and Mexican territory, the French settlements in Louisiana and Canadian territory, evangelization of Blacks and Native Americans, religious toleration in Maryland and Pennsylvania, and other scattered Catholic communities. With the rapid expansion of parochial schools in the 19th and first half of the 20th century, the bishops fought to differentiate and establish Catholic schools as a viable option to the Protestant influence embedded in the public school system.² They declared that Catholic schools were essential for the teaching of faith and morals,³ each parish was to have a school, the lay faithful were to send their children to them,⁴ and “Catholic children were not to attend non-Catholic, neutral, or mixed schools.”⁵ Catholic schools expanded for the next hundred years until falling into a sharp decline that began in the 1960s.

¹ The Cardinal Newman Society respects and often defends the rightful authority of Catholic bishops over Catholic doctrine and practice, including the sole authority to declare a non-pontifical institution within their diocese “Catholic.” No school or college can use the label “Catholic” without the approval of the bishop. Canon law, which defines this authority, also acknowledges the existence of schools which may in fact be Catholic in their fidelity and teaching but not approved to formally identify as a “Catholic school.” In this paper, we are concerned with the growing development of schools that are devoted to the authentic mission of Catholic education and conform to the authority of the Church in all matters of faith yet retain legal and operational independence from any ecclesial body—a phenomenon which seems to faithfully carry out the vocation of parenthood and the Second Vatican Council’s call for lay evangelization. We are careful to identify this phenomenon as “independent Catholic education” and not “independent Catholic schools,” as many of these schools may not yet have the formal designation of “Catholic” from their local bishop for reasons other than devotion to the authentic mission of Catholic education.

² Harold Buetow, *The Catholic School: Its Roots, Identity, and Future*. (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1988) 23–26.

³ *First Provincial Council of Baltimore* in 1829 (Guilday, 1932)

⁴ *Third Plenary Council of Baltimore* 1884 (Sacred Congregations of Propaganda de Fide, 1875)

⁵ *Code of Canon Law* 1918 (Canon Law Society, 1983) p.7.

When Pope John XXIII called for the Second Vatican Council in 1959, the thought of religious sisters leaving Catholic schools wasn't foreseen, since the Council's first and foremost goal was "to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful"⁶ and the "universal call to holiness"⁷ for all men and women, laity and religious alike. Unfortunately, for reasons too numerous to describe here, men and women religious began leaving Catholic schools and their religious orders after Vatican II. In 1965, there were more than 100,000 religious sisters in Catholic schools, comprising 69 percent of teachers;⁸ by 1980, their number dropped to fewer than 40,000. Today, it is fewer than 4,000 or 1.3 percent of teachers.⁹

Amid this crisis, the laity stepped up to the challenge. Today there are more than 140,000 lay teachers and administrators in Catholic schools.¹⁰ The Vatican Congregation for Education has issued several documents guiding this transition to laity, and it is now the norm for laypeople to staff Catholic schools.

Emergence of Independent Schools

Independent Catholic education came about in the 1970s and 1980s, amid the increased involvement of laypeople in Catholic schools and in response to changes in the Church and society after Vatican II. Founders perceived a dilution of religious instruction in available Catholic schools and sexual immorality making its way into Catholic education. There were also concerns that Catholic schools were trying too hard to mimic public schools, especially in the inner cities, while suburban schools seemed too focused on test scores and getting students into high-end colleges and careers. Many Catholic schools seemed to focus on maintaining economic stability and becoming schools for the elite.¹¹ For some, including groups of families seeking to start a school, there was simply a lack of Catholic schools in their area. In some cases, an altruistic and entrepreneurial individual sought to establish a school in an economic environment conducive, at the time, to small business start-ups.¹²

St. John Paul II's 1981 document, *Familiaris Consortio* (On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World), had a significant impact on these early founders. It warned against contemporary ideologies and taught how to fight against them. "If ideologies opposed to the Christian Faith are taught in the schools, the family must join with other families, if possible through family associations, and with all its strength and wisdom help the young not to depart from the Faith" (40).

6 Pope Paul VI, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963, 1.

7 St. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 1988, 16.

8 CARA, "Historical Estimates for the Annual Salary-Equivalent of Religious Sisters, in Teaching Positions, in the United States" in 1964. (2018) at <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2018/10/the-contribution-of-religious-sisters.html>.

9 <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2018/10/the-contribution-of-religious-sisters.html>

10 Annie Smith & Sarah Huber, *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2022-2023*, (Arlington, Va.: NCEA, 2023) 3.

11 Baker & Riordan, 1998, par. 2 The 'eliting' of the common American Catholic school and the national education crisis. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80(1).

12 Kuratko, D. 2007. Entrepreneurial leadership in the 21st century. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 13(4), 1-11.

According to Eileen Cubanski, a founder and long-time executive director of the National Association of Private Catholic* and Independent Schools (NAPCIS),¹³ the first independent school providing a Catholic education was Holy Innocents Academy in Kinnelon, N.J., founded in 1967 by Dr. William Marra.¹⁴ Parents with children in Catholic schools had alerted him that objectional sexual materials were being presented to students.¹⁵ Dr. Marra's good friend, philosopher Dietrich Von Hildebrand, encouraged him to open Holy Innocents Academy. He had previously founded Catholic Media Apostolate¹⁶ and hosted a radio series often featuring Von Hildebrand. It is not certain when the school closed.

Our Lady of Victory School opened its doors in 1973, initially as a small, lay-run school of 30 students in Panorama City, Calif.,¹⁷ and later as a homeschool curriculum provider. It operated as a school for 12 years before this transition and continues to provide a curriculum published exclusively through its company, Lepanto Press, which opened in 1995.¹⁸

Also in 1973, a small group of families near Louisville, Ky., sought the assistance of Dominican Sister Elise Groves, O.P., to help them open an independent school faithful to the Church's teachings. Holy Angels Academy, dedicated to the angels surrounding the throne of God, received recognition as a Catholic school at its opening by Archbishop Thomas J. McDonough. It currently serves 101 students and appears to be the oldest operating independent school, going strong after 50 years.

Another early independent effort was Colorado Catholic Academy, a K-12 school which opened in 1974 and operated for 33 years before closing due to financial constraints. Like Holy Angels, it received recognition by the Archbishop of Denver. It proclaimed that it was established "to serve families in raising grace-filled children [and] dedicated to the traditions of the Roman Catholic Faith including the sanctity of human life and the pursuit of eternal life."

No one knows exactly how many initiatives were undertaken since then. Cubanski estimates that there were more than 150 independent schools operating in the Catholic tradition at any one point in time, but this has not been documented, aside from the membership in NAPCIS. According to Cubanski, enrollment in independent Catholic education has slowly and steadily increased, with many of the schools adopting a strong emphasis on the liberal arts and/or classical education. (Table 1)

¹³ NAPCIS includes an asterisk in its name after "Catholic" to acknowledge that some but not all of its schools are formally recognized as Catholic by their local bishops. The following appears on its website: "The word 'Catholic' appears in the name of the organization only to reflect the fact that some member schools have received the consent of the competent ecclesiastical authority in their diocese to bear the title Catholic School in accordance with c.803.3. NAPCIS claims no authority to determine if a member school may bear this title, nor does membership in NAPCIS permit a school to call itself Catholic."

¹⁴ Personal conversations May 5, 2023. See also <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.32133814?seq=1>

¹⁵ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.32133814?seq=1>

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_A._Marra

¹⁷ <https://www.olvs.org/about/our-story/>

¹⁸ <https://www.olvs.org/about/our-story/>

Table 1*Current NAPCIS Member Schools and Year of their Establishment*

Years	1970– 1980	1990– 1995	1996– 2000	2001– 2005	2006– 2011	2012– 2023
Number of Schools	7	12	13	14	12	24

Note. Data obtained from Eileen Cubanski, Exec. Dir., NAPCIS.

NAPCIS counts a total of 169 member schools throughout its history. Thirty percent of these schools closed after about 7 years on average.¹⁹ Nevertheless, NAPCIS school membership has incrementally increased since its founding. As schools closed, others opened, with a net effect of a slow and steady upward trend. Adding the non-member independent schools that we know exist today, we estimate between 200–300 independent schools were in operation at some point during the last 50 years.

These are primarily brick-and-mortar schools, but NAPCIS also includes two fully online schools as members: Queen of Heaven Academy in Gilbert, Arizona, and Veritas Christi High School in Ann Arbor, Mich.—the latter a school for students with special educational needs. Two member schools are affiliated with Regnum Christi, a lay religious apostolate: Everest Academy of Lemont, Ill., and Everest Collegiate High School and Academy in Clarkston, Mich. Rhodora Donahue Academy in Ave Maria, Fla., began as an independent school but was later adopted by the local parish.

In 2013, the Chesterton Schools Network was established to help Catholic laypeople use the same curriculum and approach as the first Chesterton Academy started in 2007 by Dale Alquist and Tom Bengtson in Minneapolis, Minn.²⁰ The Network has grown to 44 schools in the United States and Canada, under the Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton, a Catholic lay apostolate recognized as a canonical private association of the Christian faithful. Each school must apply to the local bishop for recognition, and 10 are members of NAPCIS.²¹ Their charism revolves around the Catholic convert G.K. Chesterton and includes a heavy emphasis on philosophy and the arts.

Another network of independent schools is the Regina Academies. The first school, Regina Coeli Academy in Wyndmoor, Pa., was founded in 2003 by a lay-led board.²² The desire of the founders, Barbara and Paul Henkels, was to “provide a rigorous Catholic education firmly rooted in the Magisterium of the Catholic Church.”²³ Three of the four schools in the network are NAPCIS member schools, and all four are recognized as Catholic by the Archbishop of Philadelphia.

¹⁹ Statistics provided from Eileen Cubanski, May 8, 2023.

²⁰ <https://chestertonschoolsnetwork.org/about#:~:text=The%20Origins%20of%20the%20Chesterton,school%20options%20available%20to%20them.>

²¹ Email conversation with Executive Director, Emily DeRostein. May 26, 2023.

²² <https://reginaacademies.org/our-schools/>

²³ <https://reginaacademies.org/our-schools/>

We are also seeing the rise of “flipped” hybrid schools, in which students study at home two or three days a week and attend a brick-and-mortar school the other two or three days.

Interestingly, the growth of independent Catholic education seems to have coincided with a similar growth in other Christian classical schools. In the 1970s, there were three separate efforts by entrepreneurial individuals, operating in three different parts of the country, who decided to join forces to act as a hub for others interested in starting classical Christian schools. (Table 2) The Association of Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS) incorporated in 1994, one year before NAPCIS, to address the “overwhelming demand for training and information on classical Christian education.”²⁴

Table 2

*ACCS Member Schools in Operation*²⁵

Years	1970–1980	1990–1995	1996–2000	2001–2005	2006–2011	2012–2023
Number of Schools	3	<50	110	<175	229	502

Note. Data obtained from <https://classicalchristian.org/out-history/>

Leadership of NAPCIS

Throughout the 1980s, the seeds of the independent school movement were planted in the heart and mind of Eileen Cubanski, the future director of the National Association of Private Catholic* and Independent Schools (NAPCIS).²⁶ She recounts a time²⁷ when, as a first-grade teacher in a Sacramento parish school, she attended a faculty in-service and was shown a film by the dissident Fr. Richard McBrien, chairman of the University of Notre Dame’s department of theology. McBrien advocated women’s ordination, the repeal of priestly celibacy, the use of birth control, and defiance of the papal doctrine of infallibility.²⁸ After 15 years of teaching and eight in school administration, including founding St. Maria Goretti Academy in Loomis, Calif., Cubanski clearly saw that something needed to be done to provide families a more faithful education.

NAPCIS started to take shape when Cubanski met and joined forces with Fran Crotty, who had been working for several years helping lay Catholics figure out how to start small independent schools. He sought out, encouraged, and cajoled prospective school entrepreneurs, while laying bare the hard facts of running a private, independent school operating on the edges of the diocesan system.

Crotty provided the crystalizing vision behind NAPCIS and the independent Catholic education movement. In 1995, he stepped forward to direct the formation of NAPCIS with

²⁴ <https://classicalchristian.org/our-history/>

²⁵ The Association of Classical and Christian Schools has a similar start-up story with three different schools opening as lay-run efforts between 1978 and 1983 in different parts of the country. Each founder expressed it as God’s inspiration calling them to open a Christian school run in the classical tradition. <https://classicalchristian.org/our-history/>

²⁶ See footnote 13 regarding the asterisk in the name.

²⁷ Robert Spencer, “Desert Blossoms” *Sursum Corda* (Spring, 1996) 50.

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/29/us/rev-richard-mcbrien-catholic-firebrand-dies-at-78.html>

four founding schools: Kolbe Academy in Napa, Calif. (opened in 1980), Manresa Academy in Reno, Nevada (opened in 1993 and closed in 1995), St. Maria Goretti Academy in Sacramento, Calif. (opened in 1993 and closed in 2007), and Thomas Aquinas School in Tahoe City, Calif. (opened in 1994 and closed in 2005). The original board members included John Brennan, Carol Coyne, Fran and Margie Crotty, Eileen Cubanski, Chuck and Margaret Day, Michele Jenkins, Jerry and Diane Muth, Chris Potter, Doug and Janet Sherman, and Robert Spencer. It was Diane Muth who coined the association's unofficial motto, "It's all about the salvation of souls and academic excellence."²⁹

Within its first five years, NAPCIS membership went from 4 schools to 32 schools (2000); adding a net 14 more schools in the next five years (2005); 16 in the following five years (2010); and 20 in the next 13 years (2023), for a total of 82 current and active member schools (two schools merged).

Member schools are not required to use a particular educational methodology or curriculum, as long as they adhere to the teachings of the Catholic faith and work in obedience to the Pope and the Magisterium. They also must advocate excellence and professionalism in the curriculum and the faculty they employ, maintain stability and a degree of permanence for the institution, have designated responsibilities for their administrative staff, demonstrate fiscal responsibility and accountability, fulfill the school's philosophy, and have a clear mission statement, goals, and objectives.³⁰ The trustees, chief administrator, and essential professional staff must be practicing Catholics—which is often one of the biggest challenges for these schools, finding practicing Catholic teachers.

Independent schools can show the seriousness of their educational efforts through membership in NAPCIS, which provides a sense of credibility and legitimacy of their efforts to parents and the community. A third-party agency focused on Catholic identity is available to the school administration and provides support and networking. NAPCIS understands their special needs as small, autonomous schools faithful to Catholic teaching and embracing traditional methodologies.

Members also have the opportunity for accreditation through NAPCIS, designed to be efficient and affordable for small schools. NAPCIS accreditation reviews the school's mission, objectives, and educational philosophy; standards for moral behavior of faculty, staff, and students; institutional policies and governance; facilities; and financial management to help its employees fulfill its educational mission. The first criterion is how the Catholic faith is taught and lived throughout the school.³¹ Schools must adhere to the Catholic faith as "set forth in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and other documents of the Magisterium,"³² and "the administrator, faculty, and staff [must] demonstrate the practice of the Catholic Faith, especially in the action of prayer, which initiates and directs all activities in the school."³³ All board members, administrators, faculty, and staff must make an oath of fidelity to the

29 Personal conversation, 2007. Eileen Cubanski. "NAPCIS History", n.d.

30 <https://nadcis.org/become-a-member/membership-overview/>

31 <https://nadcis.org/accreditation/accreditation-standards-of-excellence/>

32 <https://nadcis.org/accreditation/accreditation-standards-of-excellence/>

33 <https://nadcis.org/accreditation/accreditation-standards-of-excellence/>

Magisterium and a profession of faith to the Catholic Church. Also, “religious services and activities are directed toward ensuring the adherence and participation of the students, including non-Catholic students, [as] an effort supported fully by their parents.”³⁴

Recent Motivations for Independent Schools

Long after the turmoil of the post-Vatican II years, there has been a steady growth of independent schools providing faithful Catholic formation. While the reasons seem as varied as the laypeople founding these schools, there are some common motivators.

Following the 2009 release of the Common Core State Standards, there quickly followed a revised SAT college entrance exam that conformed to the Common Core. This deeply concerned Catholic school leaders, as they did not want their students testing at a disadvantage below public school students. The Common Core appeared to be the future of public education at that time, and Catholic schools did not want to be “left behind.” As a result, more than 100 of the 175 diocesan school systems implemented the Common Core Standards to some degree. With the standards came new aligned textbooks, and some parents began to wonder what the true difference between a public and Catholic school education was when so many of the instructional components in both types of schools were identical. Parents also struggled with the Common Core math approach. Many had concerns about the Common Core leading to a centralized and political federal takeover of education.

More recently, we have seen the shockingly rapid ascendancy of radical gender ideology and critical race theory. These ideologies have infected those Catholic schools that lack a firm grounding in Catholic teaching, clear internal policies, and teachers and administrators with a thorough understanding of Christian anthropology and human dignity. Parents are concerned about transgender ideology influencing their children and racial division and resentment fostered by current ideology.

The Covid-19 pandemic also seems to have spurred interest in independent schooling. School shutdowns led to student mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and attention deficit disorder, exacerbated by unmonitored and limitless access to technology and social media. Many Catholic schools were quick to return to in-person learning, but others remained closed for many months and provided only online classes. Even at schools that opened, there was substantial disagreement about masking policies. All this encouraged parents to seek schools that are independent of diocesan operational policies while fully adhering to Church authority on faith and morals.

Finally, the “classical” movement has attracted many Catholic parents to independent schools with a traditional, Catholic liberal arts focus. “Classical” has become a way of signaling that a school is faithful to Catholic teaching, conservative, patriotic, and rejects the current culture push. These schools mitigate the impact of the common culture by

³⁴ <https://napcis.org/accreditation/accreditation-standards-of-excellence/>

reducing screen time in school, persuading parents to not give their children early access to cell phones, and reducing or eliminating student use of social media.³⁵ Instead, they focus on good literature and the sources of Western culture.

Lack of Church Approval

Many independent schools, although fully devoted to Catholic teaching and often even exemplary models for the reform of weaker Catholic schools, are not formally recognized as Catholic by their local bishop. This can be a cause of confusion and disappointment among Catholic families and educators, but clearly it is important that bishops uphold their authority to determine what may be labeled “Catholic.”

Some bishops seem uncomfortable with the notion of an approved Catholic school that is exempt from direct ecclesial control, or the bishop may be concerned about competition with parochial and diocesan schools. Parents, on the other hand, may be unwilling to submit to diocesan policies and practices that are outside the bounds of faith and morals, such as demanding certain masking policies under Covid-19. There may even be disagreements that fall within the realm of prudential judgment affecting Catholic identity, such as a diocese requiring catechetical textbooks that do not conform to a school’s classical methodology or to a school’s preferred yet faithful textbooks. Wary of conflict, some independent school leaders have simply declined to ask a bishop’s approval for official Catholic standing.

When efforts to work within a diocesan system are stalled, blocked, or deemed unfeasible, families move to the legal and civil option of incorporation and start a school using a small-business model. Many schools choose to operate under this civil and legal umbrella as a religious, educational, non-profit corporation. The Catholic Church cannot prohibit such schools from operating and delivering instruction in the Catholic faith, but bishops can withhold the “Catholic” label. Schools may instead use descriptive language such as, “an independent school in the Catholic tradition” or a “private school teaching the Catholic faith.”

Some schools have a *de facto* or “handshake” relationship with their diocese. Here, the school retains its autonomy as a private association not “acting” in the name of the Church but in their own name or the name of individual members.³⁶ Canon Law allows for this autonomy: it “is a concrete normative development of a fundamental right, the right of association (c. 215), intimately related to the right to promote and carry out apostolic action” (c. 216).³⁷ The competent ecclesiastical authority can still intervene, if teachings are “contrary to doctrine, discipline, or integrity of morals.”³⁸

35 St. Faustina Academy in Irving, TX (independent school) policy for social media: Social Media: No Social Media (particularly Instagram, Snapchat and Tik Tok) allowed if you are a current student beginning with the school year of 23/24. You are responsible for all postings. No inappropriate language or pictures should ever be posted on any media outlet. If a student creates a false account, posts, sends or shares inappropriate material on social media outlets, the student may lose their place at Faustina permanently.

36 Brian Austin, “Canon 806: Regulation of Catholic Schools and Their Just Autonomy,” *Roman Replies and CLSA Advisory Opinions* (2021). Retrieval at https://www.academia.edu/59014560/Canon_806_Regulation_of_Catholic_Schools_and_Their_Just_Autonomy. 154-155

37 Austin, 2021, 154-155.

38 Austin, 2021, 154-155.

Other independent schools seek a recognized status, retaining their position as private associations (under Canon 299 Sec. 1) and their operational autonomy, but benefitting from a closer relationship with the Church. Recognized status means the school may be listed in the *Official Catholic Directory*, a national directory of all Catholic religious, charitable, and educational entities in the United States,³⁹ as a “Catholic, private school.” This is beneficial when the school seeks funding from foundations and donors requiring this recognition. Still, the school operates financially independent from the diocese. Whereas diocesan schools and parish schools might receive a subsidy from both the local parish and the diocese, independent schools do not. Recognition does not take away the legal responsibility of the independent board for the school’s oversight.

Occasionally, a diocese might require a legal indemnity agreement.⁴⁰ This statement of indemnity clarifies the financial and legal arrangement between the independent school and the diocese, allowing both institutions autonomy and independence in operations. These must be reviewed carefully by the school’s lawyer for ambiguities or undesired entanglement.

A lack of diocesan recognition as “Catholic” necessitates continuous explanation as to the school’s relationship to the diocese and the universal Church. A way of explaining this, according to Cubanski, is that the school chooses not to be “independent from” the diocese but “independent to” choose its own curriculum, methodology, and educational philosophy while remaining faithful. The reasons are often practical and not a disagreement with the bishop over Catholic matters. For instance, a school may choose not to adhere to a diocese’s emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) courses, a diocesan requirement that all recognized schools provide computers to students, mandatory sex education, state certification for teachers and principals, or immunization requirements for children. In a diocese that participates in state-funded school choice programs, a school may be concerned about legal requirements or the potential for state interference in a school’s Catholic education.

Forty-three (43) or 54 percent of the 82 current NAPCIS schools are recognized as Catholic by their bishops. Although formally Catholic, they remain independent. They can operate efficiently and “lean,” making changes and implementing decisions in an expedited manner according to their particular vision and philosophy, as opposed to working in a larger bureaucratic system where key decisions are made in a central diocesan office.

Benefits of Independent Schools

When a family finds an independent school with an educational philosophy, pedagogy, and curriculum that aligns with their own, a strong partnership results. There is generally harmony around the dinner table regarding school topics, activities, and friendships. Families can count on the school to teach and reinforce the family’s values and beliefs, because they come from the same source, the Church and the Creed. It’s when the family’s desires and the school’s mission, vision, and philosophy are misaligned, that the student

³⁹ See Official Catholic Directory, Frequently Asked Questions: “What is the USCCB Group Ruling and how does it relate to The Official Catholic Directory” at <https://www.officialcatholicdirectory.com/OCD/faq>. (Retrieved May 21, 2023)

⁴⁰ See Diocese of Arlington (1997) and Mariamante Academy Indemnity Document in Appendix.

is caught up in controversy and sides begin to form. Thus, the importance of choosing a school that aligns with family values and beliefs about the purpose, means, and outcomes of education cannot be overemphasized.

Faithful independent schools model a definite Catholic identity and worldview in not only their curriculum and programming but also in how they operate. Sacraments and service are evident along with spiritual programs to deepen the student's (and family's) faith life. Catholic programs that emphasize formation in virtue and morality develop good citizens and build up the Church and broader community.

Another benefit of these lay-led schools is that many (47 percent of NAPCIS schools) are configured to support students from PreK/Kindergarten through 12th grade, allowing children from the same family to attend the same school. This structure provides stability for students remaining in the same school throughout their elementary and secondary years.

There is also a public financial benefit to these schools. They typically do not get parish financial support, yet they help satisfy the Church's obligation to provide for the Catholic education of her children, saving resources that might otherwise be devoted to parochial and diocesan schools. They also save the state and local government resources that might be required for public schooling.

Challenges of Independent Schools

Operating at the edge of the diocesan school system can cause suspicion of independent schools. "Why aren't they diocesan?" "What does the bishop think of this school?" "They must be some kind of charismatic, schismatic, or unhinged cult." They might be viewed by clergy as financial threats, renegades, inconsequential, unprofessional, a drain on diocesan school enrollment, or as reverting to a pre-Vatican II era. It can be a significant challenge for an independent school to dispel such misconceptions and gain legitimacy and a strong reputation.

Another common challenge is not being able to seek accreditation through the local Catholic accrediting agency, if a school is not officially Catholic. Having accreditation can assist in accessing government funding, grants, and scholarships. Similarly, not being listed in the *Official Catholic Directory* can preclude a school from qualifying for funding or obtaining services, such as insurance, that are restricted to Catholic entities.

Access to the sacraments, an essential element for a strong Catholic education, can also pose a problem for schools operating outside of the diocesan network. Finding a priest to say regular Mass for students can be a significant challenge. Diocesan priests require permission from their bishop to celebrate Mass at these schools, so unless a priest from a religious order is available, the school must work with the local bishop, who may prioritize his own schools.

Another challenge is interaction with the local diocesan superintendent. Preserving a proper balance between engagement with the diocese and appropriate autonomy can be difficult.

Conclusion

The stories of independent schools and their founding by Catholic laypeople are remarkably similar: faithful Catholic parents and others with an American entrepreneurial spirit of “just doing it myself” find a need and fill it. Sometimes the need is highlighted by some new threat to Catholic identity in existing Catholic schools. Sometimes the need, as we are likely to see expand in the growing world of school choice, is to serve a new population or region.

The founders of independent schools seem compelled with a “crazy idea” they say God placed in their hearts; an idea they just cannot shake. With an ardent desire to fulfill this call, and often buoyed by prayer more than financial support, these intrepid school founders set out and find kindred spirits. By their efforts they take up the responsibility of Catholic parents to lead their children to Christ and help build the kingdom of God.

APPENDIX A

Profile: Holy Angels Academy

For 50 years, Holy Angels Academy in Louisville, Ky., has remained dedicated to providing an authentic Catholic education to children and families. Inspired and initially led by Sr. Mary Elise Groves O.P., a small group of lay faithful quietly worked to open Holy Angels Academy in 1973 to “preserve Catholic education in accord with the Magisterium of the Church” as the effects of Vatican II, the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and the Land O’Lakes Statement held the public’s attention.

Facing numerous financial challenges throughout its 50 years, Holy Angels Academy has persevered despite moving several times before settling at its current location. The school currently has a student body of 101 students in grades PreK–12 and uses a classical approach, which it adopted even before it gained its current popularity.

The Holy Angels school motto, “Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam” (For the Greater Glory of God), is evident in its religious practices. Students attend daily Mass and recite the Morning Offering, with prayers to St. Michael, their guardian angels, and special prayers for parents and the evangelization of youth rounding out a typical day.

Recognizing the advantage of being small and the disadvantage of not having a parish for financial support, Headmaster Michael Swearingen relates that it was all thanks to those “faithful Catholics so willing to sacrifice for the good of the students” that Holy Angels Academy continues today. With a keen view toward helping its students achieve their full potential on earth and their ultimate destiny of eternal happiness in Heaven, Holy Angels Academy strives, according to Swearingen, to “love students as parents do, willing what is best for them each day.”

The Holy Angels mission statement is, “To educate and form our youth by the means of Catholic schooling in the classical tradition, so as to prepare them to lead holy and

honorable lives for God and country and thus attain the end for which they were created, that is, eternal happiness with God.”

The school website boasts endorsements from Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville and Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Tex., stating respectively, “Holy Angels Academy is a wonderful example, an example to be imitated” and “Holy Angels is about... passing on Light and Leaven, Truth and Joy to the beautiful children and young people that are here.”

When asked about his hopes for Holy Angels Academy, Swearingen humbly replied, “to serve students, by the grace of God and under the intercession of our Blessed Mother, for another 50 years.”

Profile: Our Lady of Victory School

Founded in 1973 by Catholic families, Our Lady of Victory School opened in rented classrooms in Panorama City, Calif., for a small group of 30 students. Upset with changes in their children’s Catholic school, these families decided to start one on their own. They elected William Bowman as the school’s first director; he continued with the school and its subsequent homeschool program until 1991, when Charlotte Jones, an original founding member, took over operations.

Like most independent schools, Our Lady of Victory faced financial concerns and space challenges early on. Three retired Catholic school teachers were the first teachers at the school, but with its growing popularity, the student population climbed and required moves to larger accommodations twice in the first three years. As the student population increased, so did expenses.

After 12 years, in 1977, Bowman and other school leaders made the difficult decision to convert to a homeschool provider program—which at the time was a unique idea. Parents had difficulty finding good Catholic curricula and materials, so Bowman began writing a curriculum and designing courses of study for students. It may have been the first Catholic homeschool curriculum written! The program was a hit, and enrollment increased steadily from 100 to 1,000 students over the next 25 years.

After Charlotte Jones took over the homeschooling program, the group started Lepanto Press. And in 2007, Our Lady of Victory became one of two Catholic homeschool programs accredited by NAPCIS. Our Lady of Victory sought NAPCIS membership, because it “confirms the character and quality of the school and gives witness and support to its philosophy of education. It provides assurance that a school has met the high standards of spiritual and academic excellence which characterize NAPCIS schools.”⁴¹

⁴¹ <https://www.olvs.org/about/accreditation/>

Profile: Kolbe Academy and Trinity Prep

Looking for an alternative to the progressive school system and its standardized approach, three Catholic families joined together in 1980 to create a formalized day school called Kolbe Academy. Four of the founders of Kolbe later went on to found NAPCIS in 1995 to share their experience and knowledge with others who desired a deeply rich Catholic educational experience for their children.

Fielding phone calls from across the country, these founders just couldn't keep up with the requests for start-up assistance from homeschool families, so they created a start-up manual, adding all their advice on operating a school and recommendations for curriculum, and started Kolbe Academy Homeschool in 1987.

In 1995, a significant group of families left Kolbe to start Trinity Grammar and Prep. Fortunately, Kolbe was able to subsist on the income from the homeschooling operations until 2008 when Kolbe Academy and Trinity Grammar and Prep reunited. The new school, Kolbe-Trinity moved to the Trinity campus, and Kolbe's homeschooling operations took over the Academy's site and added warehouse and office spaces to accommodate its online school operations in 2013.

Both institutions cite prayer and sacrament as signs of strong Catholic identity, with the Catholic faith woven into all academic subjects. Kolbe-Trinity follows a classical model like the original Kolbe Academy. It was recognized by the local bishop in 2014 as a Catholic school, and it takes advantage of the teacher training offered by the diocese. Kolbe-Trinity sees the advantages of being independent as having the ability "to remain faithful to their mission, less bureaucracy, and full control of [their] non-religious curriculum," states President John Bertolini.



About the Author

Denise L. Donohue, Ed.D., is vice president for educator resources and evaluation at The Cardinal Newman Society. She earned her doctorate in educational leadership, with a concentration in curriculum development and a dissertation on the establishment of private, independent Catholic schools. She has served as interim chair and visiting assistant professor of a college education department, founder and principal of a Catholic high school, founder and religion coordinator for a Catholic grade school, and assistant head of a Catholic K-12 school.

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