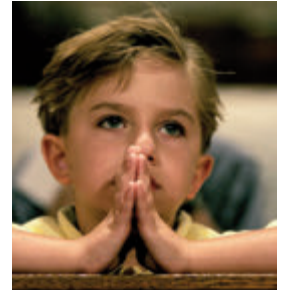


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Catholic **UPDATE**

Catholic Schools I'd Choose Them Again



by Elizabeth Bookser Barkley

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in a small Midwestern city, my personal, moral and intellectual growth was shaped by two forces: my family and Catholic schools.

Memories of both of these educational influences are positive and lasting. Even before Vatican II articulated the concept of parents as “the first and foremost educators of their children,” my parents assumed that role. They were helped in that task by dedicated teachers, many of them Sisters of Charity who traced their roots to St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, a 19th-century leader in American Catholic education.

The culture at large and in the Catholic Church has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. There are fewer religious sisters in the United States and in Catholic schools. Many public schools offer excellent curricula, supplemented by parish religious education programs and outreach to youth. The costs of all services, including education, have shot up, straining family budgets. In this *Update*, we'll take a look at Catholic schools today, and show why many parents, where Catholic schools are available and it works for the family, still choose Catholic schools for elementary and beyond.

As my children were nearing school age, my husband and I had a difficult choice: send them to the excellent public schools in our district or enroll them in our parish school, which also has a good reputation. We chose the latter. Reflecting on my children's educational experience, my own years teaching in three archdiocesan high schools, my present position as a professor at a Catholic college and discussions with a daughter who teaches in a Catholic elementary school, I would make the same choice today.

The decision is not at all related to the “siege mentality” of some who see Catholic schools as a refuge from what a recent commencement speaker called a “poisoned culture,” a claim I do not share. Steeped in the wisdom of the Vatican II pastoral document *The Church in the Modern World*, I agree that the Church “goes forward with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot that the world does. She serves as a leaven and kind of soul for human society.”

Catholic schools must engage their students with the world in which they live, while at the same time helping students interpret and influence it. Catholic schools achieve these two goals because of five characteristics I have come to value.



1. Shared values

One of my best friends teaches in a suburban public school. Knowing her deep faith, her commitment to values and her academic credentials, I would put her up against any teacher I've known in Catholic schools, and I don't doubt that there are many teachers in public schools like her. The difference: Staff in Catholic schools have made a commitment to embrace a common set of Catholic-Christian values. They buy into core beliefs that they bring to all their classes, not just religion classes.

Here's how one of my friends defined the difference: "Catholic schools infuse faith into every part of the school day—religion class, math class, discipline, extracurriculars, everything."

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