

Do Catholic Schools Really Promote Segregation?

By MONSIGNOR EDGAR MCCARREN
(Part 4 of a Series)

It is alleged by opponents of Catholic schools that these schools are havens of segregation. The facts which are available tend to suggest just the opposite — if anything, Catholic schools are instruments of integration.

The basic tendencies at work are not always clearly perceptible in small communities, even in small cities. In order to glimpse the real truth, it is necessary to examine what happens in large cities like New York and Washington. For instance, when the New York City public schools lost nearly 25,000 white pupils in 1966, it was stated or implied by some that these white children had fled into parochial schools.

This kind of assertion is demonstrably false. In fact, there is mounting evidence that parochial schools slow down the flight of whites from a changing neighborhood and act as a stabilizing force. A close examination of changing neighborhoods seems to reveal that the Catholic school has greater "holding power" for whites than does the public school and has a special role to play in integration. A number of considerations are pertinent here.

1) An ethnic survey of Catholic elementary schools during 1966 revealed that the Catholic elementary school enrollment in Manhattan was 46% Negro and Spanish-speaking; in Manhattan and The Bronx together, it was 30% Negro and Spanish-speaking.

These figures exist despite the fact that only a very small percentage of Negroes are Catholic. It is intriguing to note that 20% of the Negroes in the Catholic elementary schools in Manhattan are not Catholic.

2) A 1964 ethnic survey of Catholic elementary schools in Manhattan and The Bronx revealed that in 35 racially mixed neighborhoods the Catholic elementary schools were better integrated than were the neighborhoods.

3) Even in the relatively small community of Malverne (Long Island), the fleeing white pupils did not enter Catholic schools. During the past few years, the Catholic elementary school in Malverne has had no increase in the usual number of first grade applicants, and the total enrollment has actually decreased slightly. The same is true of other small Long Island communities such as Freeport and Roosevelt.

4) A survey of Catholic elementary schools in Manhattan and The Bronx revealed that there was a higher percentage of relatively integrated Catholic elementary schools than was the case in the public school system. The New York City Board of Education classifies any school not having more than 90% white or more than 90% minority group (Negroes and Spanish-speaking) enrollment as a "mid-range" school. To be very specific, in this method of classification, only 12 out of 45 Catholic elementary schools in Manhattan are more than 90% white.

5) A close analysis of long-term trends in large cities strongly suggests what is really happening. When in minority groups such as Negroes and Spanish-speaking people begin to move into an area, some white parents of Catholic school children refuse to panic and move. (Perhaps they value Catholic education very highly and fear that they will be unable to get their children into another Catholic school if they move.) The local public school soon becomes almost completely non-white, while the parochial school starts becoming integrated. This has already happened in Washington, D.C., and it now seems to be happening in the City of New York.

6) For 100 years, the Catholic school has served mostly the poor and the immigrant. In addition, the Catholic elementary school has usually enjoyed a broader mixture of social and economic classes than has the public school.

Now it appears that the Catholic elementary school may have a special role to play in helping to integrate the races. The previously mentioned facts suggest this. In addition, consider two case studies:

(a) The Nativity School, a Catholic elementary school in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, enrolled 766 pupils in 1966 of which 441 were Negro and Spanish-speaking. The other 325 pupils were white. These white children were bussed from 31 white neighborhoods into the Bedford-Stuyvesant ghetto and into an integrated school. The obvious motivation of the parents was a desire for Catholic education for their children. They are willing to bus little children into an integrated school in order to get it.

(b) The Catholic secondary school known as Rice High School in the heart of Harlem had 913 students in 1966. Of these, 324 were Negro and Spanish-speaking boys. More than 500 white boys from white neighborhoods came into the Harlem ghetto and into an integrated high school in order to obtain a Catholic education.

7) What about the 25,000 white children who fled the New York City public schools in 1966? Certainly they did not go into the New York City Catholic elementary schools because the total enrollment of year

schools elsewhere — there is no other place for them to go.

Incidentally, a simple investigation of transfer records would reveal precisely what schools they have transferred. But no one seems interested enough to make such a study.

The charge that Catholic schools promote segregation is inaccurate at best, slander at worst. In fact, it is clear that there are many reasons to suggest that a good way to promote integration would be to encourage Catholic schools.

Where did the 25,000 fleeing white children go? A little reflection should convince anyone that the thousands of white children fleeing the public schools in the inner city each year are going into public

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