The 20th Century

In 1727 the Ursulines opened the first Catholic school in the United States in New Orleans. As early as 1792 Bishop John Carroll, the first Catholic bishop in America, wrote a pastoral letter instructing parents on the importance of obtaining Christian education for their children.

Catholic schools have played a vital role in the history of our country and our diocese. Parish schools were a response to the educational needs of the waves of European immigrants, mostly Catholic, entering the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when the existing schools were Protestant. Catholic schools have evolved to meet the challenges of each new era.

Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton is now credited with founding the parochial school system as she opened her first Catholic school in Emmitsburg, Md., in 1808. Bishop John Neumann developed the parochial school concept in the Philadelphia area in the 1860s. As settlers moved into the west, Catholic education based on these concepts followed them across the country.

Today the Church continues to cherish the ministry of Catholic schools. When the Holy Father visited the United States in 1987, he met with educators in New Orleans and praised their work, encouraging them to continue their "special role within the Church and within society."

Rochester history

In Rochester, since 1836, the Church has provided parents the opportunity to have their children educated in an environment that fosters Roman Catholic tradition while providing academic excellence — an opportunity that has served both the Church and society.

German immigrants to the new city of Rochesterville opened the first Catholic school in the Diocese, St. Joseph's School, in 1836. Soon after the Redemptorists opened schools at SS. Peter & Paul's in the city and St. Mary's Church in Dansville in the late 1830s. In 1839 Irish immigrants opened a school at St. Patrick's in Rochester. The move toward Catholic education in the area was so strong in the early years that Bishop Timon of the Diocese of Buffalo, which included Rochester at that time, issued a pastoral letter that denied the Sacraments to parents if they did not send their children to a Catholic school when one was available.

Parochial school movement strengthens

After the Council of Baltimore's ruling in 1884 that all parishes should build parochial schools, Bishop McQuaid, the first Bishop of Rochester, became one of the strongest national advocates for the parochial school concept. He told persons petitioning for a church to start the school first, then come back for permission to build the church.

Many of the buildings were "duplexes," housing the church on the first floor and the school on the second. The Bishop referred frequently to Catholic Free Schools, intended for the poor. There also were "select schools" where tuition was paid.

Catholic schools were a major focus for Bishop McQuaid during his entire tenure in Rochester, from 1868 to 1909. He was firm in his belief that schools had to be academically sound, as well as religiously oriented. In 1874 the diocesan schools participated in the Regents examination process for the first time. The first diocesan teachers' conference was held in Rochester in July 1896 — the first such conference for Catholic teachers in the United States.

By 1896, Catholic schools had registered some 8,300 pupils in the City of Rochester. Rochester public schools had just under 20,000 in that year. Cost per pupil in the Catholic schools was $22.18!

The number of Catholic schools in the Diocese continued to grow until, when Bishop McQuaid died in 1909, there were 53 elementary schools in the 93 parishes.

Across the country growth was the watchword, too — enrollment in Catholic elementary schools in 1889 was more than 400,000; in 1920 it had more than quadrupled. At the secondary level, by the late 1950's there were some 1,500 diocesan and parish high schools nationally, serving nearly 450,000 students. In addition, there were almost 850 private high schools operated by religious orders, with over a quarter-million pupils.

The mid-60's: A turning point

By 1959, the number of students in Diocesan Catholic schools had grown to 55,000. But the picture would soon change.

Part of the reason for the subsequent decline in local enrollment was that crowded Catholic schools could not accept any more children and families had to be turned away. A moratorium on building schools had been issued in 1963 for three reasons: an escalation in construction costs; a large number of buildings had recently been constructed and there were signs of a leveling-off of enrollment; and a shortage of teaching sisters to staff all the recently built schools.

Other factors included:

- Financial and demographic concerns: the increased cost of Catholic education; changes in birthrate and mobility; and a shift of much of the Catholic population from urban areas to suburbs that had no Catholic schools.
- Theological concerns: people began to question the nature of the Church, the place of the school within it, and its relationship to families.
- Cultural changes in values regarding education, family and the role of institutions in the individual's life.

By 1966, school enrollment in our Diocese had shrunk to 43,000.

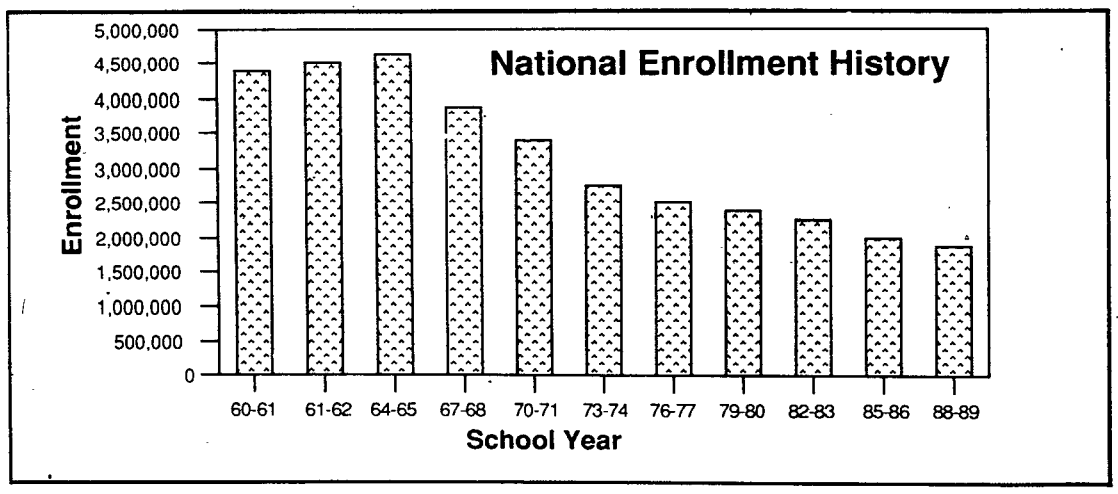
The 1960s saw a distinct downturn, nationally and locally, in the number of young people entering religious life. At the same time, a number of teachers, members of religious communities, left Catholic schools to go into religious education, social work, medicine or administrative positions, while some sisters and priests left ministry altogether. As the number of women religious teachers declined, school budgets began to rise across the country.

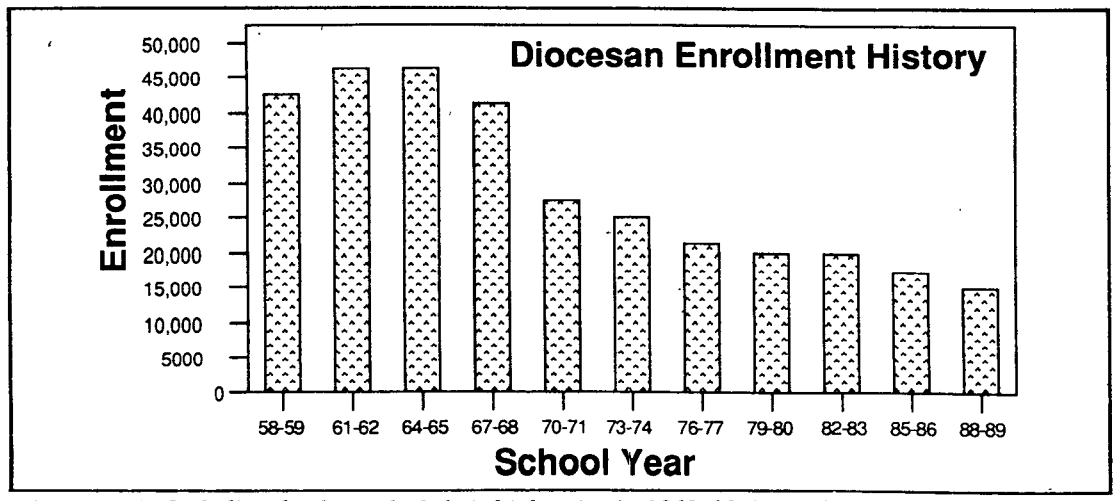
Increasingly, parents selected the option of religious education as parishes strengthened those programs and added professionally trained religious educators.

The need for Catholic schools came under increasing challenge from within the church. Critics charged that they were a relic of a "siege mentality," divisive in a pluralistic society, and consumed too much time, effort and money.

But in the Second Vatican Council, schooling was one of the proposed areas of rapprochement of the Church with the rest of the world. The **Declaration on Christian Education** stated:

- *... (The Catholic school) so orients the whole of human culture to the message of salvation that the knowledge which the pupils acquire of the world, of life and of men is illumined by faith ....*
- *Accordingly, since the Catholic school can be of such service in developing the mission for the People of God and in promoting dialogue between the Church and the community at large to the advantage of both, it is still of vital importance even in our times ...."*





The nation's Catholic schools reached their high point in 1963-66. In Rochester, peak enrollment occurred in 1963-64.