

A Vocation of Space: Race and Ethnicity as a Responsible and Necessary Challenge to U.S. Catholic Education in the 21st Century

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Introduction and Overview

A vocation in Roman Catholicism represents a religious calling to live up to the best examples and teachings from Roman Catholic Christian tradition. It is a divine calling to recognize our common "sacred dignity" that moves us to actively work toward the development of our inherent rights as humans to be full participants in our society.¹ It is inspired and led by the "befriending Spirit of Christ" that epitomizes the foundational beliefs of Roman Catholic social teaching where we are asked to serve one another and to witness to the truth of such teachings.² As a result, our particular talents and hopes embedded within our unique racial/ethnic histories and cultural traditions are revealed through this process. As these diverse vocations and representations are brought together within a particular social space we are encouraged to enter into dialogue with them and work collaboratively toward creating and sustaining true community since our human dignity and human rights exist as a result of our relationship with each other. One such social space in the history of the United States is within Roman Catholic institutions of higher learning.

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¹ Edward P. DeBerri and James E. Hug, *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 19-21; Catholic Social Teaching: Office of Social Justice, Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis: <<http://www.osjspm.org/cst/themes.htm>>. The sacred dignity and human rights of individuals includes food, shelter, clothing, employment, health care, education. It also includes freedoms of speech, religion, association, migration, and full participation in society.

² DeBerri and Hug, 18.

The Roman Catholic university represents a site of “challenge and responsibility” that “must assume a greater role in offering a common ground upon which all people can gather to collaborate in building our human family.”³ As one Catholic university president has articulated, the university has carved out a significant social space that “welcomes a diversity of people and ideas” where dialogue and debate is mediated in search of creations, innovations, and solutions on behalf of the human condition.⁴

The legacy of the Roman Catholic educational tradition in the United States has continually been about creating a public space for the presence, persistence, and change of religious and diverse ethnic expressions since the nineteenth century.⁵ At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were approximately 50,000 Roman Catholics in the United States residing mainly in Maryland and Pennsylvania. By the end of this century, this number swelled to 12,000,000 with over 10,399 Catholic parishes that eighty years earlier numbered a meager 124. These numbers reflected a solid ethnic-working class, and immigrant membership base that comprised 5,000,000 or 30 percent of the 17,000,000 individuals who had immigrated to the United States between 1850 and 1900.⁶ The first waves of Catholic immigrants were predominantly Irish and German that by the 1890s would also include immigrants from southern and eastern European nations.

The arrival and presence of an ethnic-immigrant, and working class religious tradition in the United States was greeted by a suspicious host culture that was hostile, anti-Catholic and xenophobic toward what they perceived to be an immigrant-ethnic-Catholic other. The burning down of a Roman Catholic convent and school in cities like Charles-

³ Mary E. Lyons, “The Public Purpose of this University” *Origins* 33:27 (Dec. 11, 2003), 462. Mary Lyons is the third president of the University of San Diego. This is drawn from her inaugural speech.

⁴ Lyons, 462. According to the Delegation of the Holy See at the Durban World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, one of the roots of racism and discrimination is due to faulty and inadequate education and therefore must be seen as a “good practice to be promoted” as embraced by “on the ground” educating and instructing of young people by the Catholic Church. <<http://www3.villanova.edu/mission/journal/racism/pcjpchra.htm>>

⁵ The case of majority women and women of color in the Catholic educational tradition is beyond the scope of this presentation, yet extremely necessary to examine as it presents unique circumstances and critical challenges for understanding the history of Roman Catholic education.

⁶ Leahy, S.J., 1-2.

town, Massachusetts or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was not uncommon in nineteenth century America.⁷ With the leadership and guidance from clergy within local parish communities, these Roman Catholics responded by holding-on and preserving those unique religious and ethnic markers that made them different from the White Anglo Saxon Protestant majority that in turn, angrily tolerated an ethnic Catholic identity that persisted and eventually flourished. This was most prevalent in the creation and sustenance of a Roman Catholic educational system.

The "alien status" of Roman Catholics generated and fostered the energy and enthusiasm for separate, protective and supportive educational spaces. For one writer, it represents the single most important reason why the Catholic educational effort in the United States was so successful.⁸ Over time, the institutionally guided decision to create a distinctly Catholic school system would eventually lead to significant changes and challenges regarding the maintenance and preservation of religious and ethnic identity for Roman Catholics in the twentieth century and contemporary period.

The purpose of this essay is to assert that the legacy of the U.S. Roman Catholic educational system has been about creating a *vocation of space* for working class, racial/ethnic immigrant groups. Unfortunately, due to pressures of assimilation and Anglo-conformity beginning in the mid-twentieth century, this vocation has been abandoned and forgotten. The time has come for Roman Catholic Higher education to revisit this responsible and necessary challenge. Through this essay,

⁷ Stephen J. Denig, CM, "Catholic Education in the United States: Meeting the Challenge of Immigration" in *Commitment to Diversity, Catholics, and Education in a Changing World*. Mary Eaton, Jane Longmore, and Arthur Naylor (eds.). (New York: Cassell Press, 2000), 218. Denig describes the burning of an Ursuline convent and a Catholic school accompanied by riots and resulting in the death of thirteen people. Other scholarship underscores that these anti-Catholic sentiments were compounded by issues of class, ethnic identity, and religion. Consider that Irish Americans of Ulster origin played a central role in the nativist (anti-immigrant) crusade of the antebellum era. The influx of poorer Catholics immigrants from Ireland led these Americans of Ulster origin to distinguish themselves sharply from their countrymen as "Scotch-Irish" and to assert their "Americanness". Furthermore, the Orange Order, a militant Protestant Organization founded in Ulster clashed repeatedly with Irish Catholic Immigrants in New York City and Philadelphia from the 1820s onward, culminating in the riots and church-burnings of 1844. Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History*. (Harlow: Pearson, 2000), 80-2.

⁸ James W. Sanders, *The Education of an Urban Minority: Catholics in Chicago 1833-1965*. (New York: Oxford, 1977), 17-8.

we call upon Catholic university administrators to instill this *vocation of space* within its institutions of higher learning by supporting curricular programs that foster a healthy dialogue and debate of diverse people and their ideas. The intellectual heritage of academic programs such as Ethnic Studies in Roman Catholic Higher education speak to this *legacy* and to the best traditions of Roman Catholic social teachings and thought.⁹

Support for the Argument: the Case of Chicago

Prescribed as descendents of “commercial marauders,” the poor and ethnic immigrant church of Chicago encountered a public school system where all school children were required despite the official separation of church and state to read from the King James Bible and learn their history from school-adopted texts that offered inaccuracies about the history of Catholicism in the United States. The curriculum, textbooks, and most importantly, the teachers impressed an “English-only” curriculum that was an affront to immigrant ethnic Catholics.¹⁰ The response from Roman Catholic leadership was to carve out a supportive social space for religious and ethnic expression by establishing a separate Roman Catholic educational system. From its inception in 1843, the Chicago Roman Catholic diocese committed itself to the parochial school system, and by 1860, dictated that “whenever possible a school is to be set up in each parish.”¹¹ As symbolic opposition to Anglo-

⁹ A study on the history of ethnic studies in Roman Catholic Higher Education is essential to fully understand the significance of this point.

¹⁰ Sanders, 26, 46, 48. Another important challenge faced by Roman Catholics in relation to the Chicago public school system were staffing issues as teachers were bigoted towards qualified Catholics employees. The Roman Catholic hierarchy responded by establishing Catholic girls' high schools and academies with the intention of preparing young Catholic women for teaching positions in public schools. By 1890, a high percentage of Irish Catholic women were seeking such appointments in larger numbers. In fact, by the summer of 1902, two-thirds of the candidates who passed the Normal exam for teachers were graduates of Catholic secondary schools. So successful were Catholic students in gaining admission to the Normal School that in 1915 Superintendent Ella Flagg Young attempted to limit the number of students accepted at the teachers' college from a single high school. Roman Catholics were also active in seeking out equal representation on local school boards where issues of taxation and public school education could be addressed. Sanders, 27-30; Ellen Skerrett, “The Catholic Dimension” in *The Irish in Chicago*. Lawrence J. McCaffrey, Ellen Skerrett, Michael F. Funchion, Charles Fanning (eds.). (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 45.

¹¹ Sanders, 14. In the gathering of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, some bishops actively sought to have the Council mandate Catholic schools in every parish and force Catholic parents to send their children to these schools by threatening to