

July 2013

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Recommended Citation

McCrink, C. L. (2012). Closing Chapters: Urban Change, Religious Reform, and the Decline of Youngstown's Catholic Elementary Schools, 1960-2006. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 16 (1). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce/vol16/iss1/12>

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Closing Chapters: Urban Change, Religious Reform, and the Decline of Youngstown's Catholic Elementary Schools, 1960-2006

Thomas G. Welsh
Lexington Books, 2012
\$64.13, 321 pages

Reviewed by Carmen L. McCrink, Barry University

The establishment of Catholic elementary (parochial) schools in the United States serves as a testament to the historiography of the nation as a whole, vis-à-vis the socioeconomic and political infrastructures, as well as ideologies, which have governed and framed the different eras. Clearly, from the late 1880s to the 1920s and 1930s, the country witnessed the aftermath of an immigration wave that would forever change the landscape as well as the course of American history. It was during this period that Catholicism in America was of an effervescent nature as Italian, Irish, Polish, German, and Hungarian Catholics built churches and opened schools in an effort to send a consistent message of commitment to and pride in their faith. Indeed, in this second decade of the 21st century, the mere utterance of the word Catholic may conjure up a series of mental images for the masses. These may range from a traditionalist view, through the lens of a pre-Vatican II platform, to a postmodern space whereby an individual's conscience operates within the presence of the societal fiber; specifically, issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. As such, the "Church in crisis" has become an all-too-familiar adage across American society as Catholics grapple with the tension between the desire to maintain a strong identity with their faith, while maintaining an open discourse toward the commitment to social justice as well as a response to the essence of ecumenical directives.

It is within this context that Thomas G. Welsh's book, *Closing Chapters: Urban Change, Religious Reform, and the Decline of Youngstown's Catholic Elementary Schools, 1960-2006*, illuminates the current state of affairs regarding Catholic elementary schools. Welsh provides a detailed historical account of those events that led to the founding of these urban institutions as community milestones; the recognition of these schools as beacons for academic achieve-

ment, systemic discipline and character-building; their role as centers for educational research and inquiry-based teaching; and, ultimately, how and why these schools faced declining enrollments that eventually led to their demise. Clearly, although Welsh's research is focused on the Youngstown community in northeastern Ohio, and, thus, the unfortunate closure of all "but one of its 18 parish schools between 1960 and 2006" (p. 270), the historical trends and events presented are applicable to a nationwide terrain. Furthermore, Welsh's discussion of issues in terms of demographic changes, immigration intolerance, and prevailing ideologies raises this question: How does Catholicism and the call to universality figure into this equation? When examining those parochial schools that are thriving nationwide in the midst of the decline in religious orders and the ubiquitous concern to define a Catholic identity, the following question comes to mind: What are the salient characteristics or factors that may contribute to their success and eminent survival? These questions may warrant further reflection.

Welsh devotes a considerable amount of discussion to changes in demographics as a result of the arrival of the various ethnic groups across the different decades (immigrants as well as African-American migration to the industrialized North) into the Youngstown parish communities and the subsequent phenomenon of white flight and suburbanization. Welsh posited that, "in the wake of demographic change, 'the great migration of Catholics to suburbia left behind emptying schools and churches'" (p. 176). Whereas a number of Catholic schools have been forced to close nationwide, others have gained an elitist reputation within specific dioceses. Welsh makes reference to "the so-called elitism of Catholic education" and that "almost 50 percent of students attending Catholic elementary schools come from wealthy, upper-middle-class homes" (p. 249). Indeed, an analysis of these suburban communities, such as those in South Florida, as well as other parts of the country, and the high percentage of students enrolled in Catholic elementary schools may serve to inform future research. In an effort to gain a better insight as to the parish school phenomenon in our times, elements such as the homogeneity of the student population, vis-à-vis a specific ethnic group's spirit of religiosity in the former country; and, the presence of religious orders and adherence to pre-Vatican II guidelines, namely, a specific religious order's decision to wear the full habit and continue to reside within convent spaces, may provide answers as to the how and why some parish schools survive. Thus, the question becomes how these factors may solidify the Catholic identity within parish communities, while still embracing openness to change, the convergence of ideologies,

and Christian unity.

In the chapter entitled, “Demographic Change and Urban Parish Schools,” ideological issues with reference to race are discussed within the context of the building of low-income housing projects. Welsh states the following: “Significantly, efforts by pastors, principals, and diocesan administrators to secure funding for urban parish schools that served mainly nonwhite and non-Catholic students occurred against a backdrop of raising tension between urban blacks and whites” (p. 189). In a previous chapter, “The Immaculate: One School’s Experience,” Welsh references the work of Sugrue, which is seminal when developing an understanding of how ideologies infiltrate communities and continue to perpetuate the war on poverty. Clearly, this discussion must be addressed within the meaning of Christian unity. Although there is an expectation for urban public schools across low-income communities to be engulfed by the war on poverty and conflicting ideologies, the very essence of the call to Christian unity in Catholic communities should serve as a catalyst toward acceptance of others in spite of race or socioeconomic differences. Undoubtedly, Welsh’s findings in this work suggest the opposite. Indeed, further research along these lines may be of interest in an effort to deconstruct the elitist versus low-income ethos of Catholic elementary schools.

In essence, Welsh’s research provides opportunities for Catholic school leaders to learn about the historiography of the parochial elementary school toward the development of a strategic agenda—one with an emphasis on inclusivity through community partnerships. It is within this platform, or context, that an open dialogue may serve to identify issues, such as alternative funding sources, based on current demographics and the question of Catholic identity. Although demographics are predictable, from a sociological perspective, Catholic identity and its impact on communities remains a rather complex phenomenon in our times. Ultimately, as we prepare individuals for Catholic school leadership, we must, first, identify as well as articulate those student outcomes that frame a Catholic education.

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