



---

3-1-2011

## Urban Catholic Education: Tales of Twelve American Cities, Edited by Thomas C. Hunt and Timothy Walch

John J. Convey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

---

### Recommended Citation

Convey, J. J. (2011). Urban Catholic Education: Tales of Twelve American Cities, Edited by Thomas C. Hunt and Timothy Walch. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 14 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1403082013>

This Book Review is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in Journal of Catholic Education by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu). To contact the editorial board of Journal of Catholic Education, please email [JCE@nd.edu](mailto:JCE@nd.edu).

## Urban Catholic Education: Tales of Twelve American Cities

Thomas C. Hunt and Timothy Walch, Editors  
Alliance for Catholic Education Press, 2010  
\$15.00, 330 pages

*Reviewed by John J. Convey*

Several important histories of Catholic schools already are available, including my late former colleague Harold Buetow's (1970) classic, *Of Singular Benefit: The Story of Catholic Education in the United States*, and, more recently, Timothy Walch's (1996) *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present*. Adding to these is an informative collection of narratives, *Urban Catholic Education: Tales of Twelve American Cities*, about the development of Catholic schools in 12 archdioceses from their beginnings to approximately the mid-1960s. The archdioceses are divided into three groups: "The Cradle" (Baltimore, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia), "The Heartland" (Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit, and St. Louis), and "The Borderland" (Los Angeles, New Orleans, San Antonio, and San Francisco). The editors, Thomas C. Hunt of the University of Dayton and Timothy Walch of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, have assembled a talented group of Catholic historians and scholars, some of whom already have written more extensive histories of the archdioceses they have been assigned. For the most part, the authors of the chapters faithfully followed the direction of the editors to consider the impact of demography on the expansion of the schools, the role of the archdiocesan leadership, the societal attitudes toward Catholics and Catholic schools on the part of non-Catholics, and the growth of the Catholic community in these cities.

In varying degrees, the chapters chronicle the arrival of large numbers of Irish, German, and Polish immigrants into the major urban areas of the East and Midwest, which, in turn, fueled a rapidly expanding Catholic school system in the country. Each immigrant group ordinarily established its own national parish and school. By the middle of the 19th century, Catholic schools were growing in record numbers. At the same time, public schools, which were thoroughly Protestant and overtly anti-Catholic, presented challenges to the Catholics. As a result, neither Catholics nor their schools were well received in these urban areas.

The anti-Catholic bigotry spurred the bishops to work diligently to ex-

pand Catholic schools. Various chapters in the book describe how the pervasive Protestant ethic in the public schools and active opposition to the Catholics, from the more familiar Know-Nothing Party's opposition to Irish and German immigrants in Boston and other cities to lesser known factors, such as the Edwards Law in Chicago, which required children between the ages of 7 and 14 to attend a public day school for at least 16 weeks each year with an exemption for private schools but only if they were approved by local school boards, strengthened the resolve of bishops to fight for their schools. The concerns of the bishops dominated the discussions about Catholic schools during the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884, where the bishops made Catholic schools a priority, calling for their establishment and support.

The growth of Catholic schools accelerated in the latter part of the 19th century through the mid-1960s because of the large numbers of Catholic immigrants between 1875 and 1920, and the large Catholic families that resulted, the adherence to the wish of the Council that all Catholic children be educated in Catholic schools, and the extraordinary baby boom that followed World War II. At the time of the Council approximately a half million students attended Catholic schools. That enrollment grew to almost 2 million by 1920 and to over 5.5 million by 1965. Much of the enrollment growth occurred in the archdioceses discussed in this book.

The chapters describe how the bishops, concerned about the religious education of the children and their assimilation into American life, recruited large numbers of religious from the same countries as the immigrants and the impact that these communities of religious had on the development of the schools in the various archdioceses. A few examples of the many presented in the book are the contributions of the Ursuline Sisters from Germany to New Orleans; the Sisters of Mercy from France to Cincinnati; the Sisters of the Presentation from France to San Francisco; the School Sisters of Notre Dame from Germany to Baltimore; and the Sisters of Charity, the American order founded by Elizabeth Bayley Seton, to the schools in Baltimore, New York, Cincinnati, and San Francisco.

Catholic schools would not have made the major impact that they did on these cities without the strong leadership and administrative style of the local Ordinaries. Key archbishops were not only successful in attracting scores of religious to staff the schools, they were also forceful in convincing pastors to build them and raising funds for their construction. Richard Jacobs writes in the chapter on Philadelphia, "If [Edmund Francis] Prendergast was a 'Master Builder' and 'Real Estate Genius,' his successor, Dennis Joseph Dougherty, was

‘God’s Bricklayer’” (p. 45). At the time of Prendergast’s death in 1918, almost 80,000 students attended Catholic schools in Philadelphia. Dougherty oversaw the construction of 146 schools and, within 3 years of his death in 1951, more than 135,000 students were enrolled in Philadelphia’s Catholic schools. The book contains other examples of strong Episcopal leadership especially in “The Cradle” by Michael Curley in Baltimore; John Hughes, Michael Corrigan, and Francis Spellman in New York; and William O’Connell in Boston. But aggressive leadership was also evident in the “The Heartland,” particularly by Edward Fenwick and John Purcell in Cincinnati, John Glennon and Joseph Ritter in St. Louis, George Mundelein and Samuel Stritch in Chicago, and in “The Borderland” by James McIntyre in Los Angeles.

Two additional thematic strands are woven throughout these chapters. The first is how Catholic schools dealt with the issue of race, particularly with regard to African Americans, in these large urban areas. Although most chapters touch on this point, the most extensive treatment is by Justin Poché in his chapter on the Archdiocese of New Orleans. The second but less frequent strand is the effort on the part of some early bishops to gain tax-supported funds for the Catholic schools. Small successes were achieved for a time in New York and in Minnesota.

The 300-page book contains 12 pages of photographs of various Catholic schools from 1892 to 1958 and an extensive index. The chapters run from 15 pages (San Antonio and San Francisco) to 36 pages (Philadelphia), with the longer chapters about the larger archdioceses in the East and Midwest. As the distinguished Catholic historian, David O’Brien, stated in the introduction, “The story of Catholic education...is a story about Catholics and Americans, and the stories told here are about twelve cities and a significant portion of the people who live there” (p. ix). In reading the history of Catholic schools in these urban areas, the reader will also better understand the history of these cities. Hunt and Walch have made an important contribution to the literature on the history of Catholic schools. Their book is an essential addition to the library of Catholic educators who wish to learn from the past to understand their schools better and to develop insights into how best to help Catholic schools thrive in the future.

### References

- Buetow, H. A. (1970). *Of singular benefit: The story of Catholic education in the United States*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Walch, T. (1996). *Parish school: American Catholic parochial education from colonial times to*

*the present*. New York, NY: Crossroad.

*Dr. John J. Convey is the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Professor of Education at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.*