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History of Urban Catholic Education

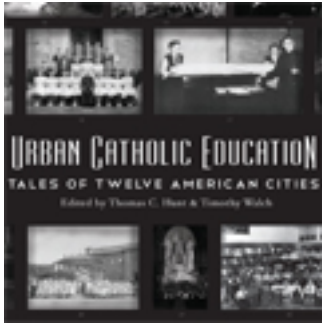
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History of Urban Catholic Education

06.03.2010 | Faculty, Catholic

Thomas Hunt, a teacher education professor and fellow in the University's Center for Catholic Education, co-edited *Urban Catholic Education: Tales of Twelve American Cities* — which is scheduled for release this month — with Timothy Walch, director of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

Hunt said their research in 12 American cities revealed both distinctions and common threads within the urban communities, but they all shared two common goals: to preserve the faith of Catholic children and to prepare them for productive lives in American society.

"The effect of Catholic schools was felt most strongly in the cities," Hunt said. "But how did certain factors affect the educational opportunities for Catholics in those cities?"

To find the answer, Hunt and Walch commissioned researchers in 12 cities — Baltimore, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New Orleans and San Antonio — to investigate the history of Catholic schools in those areas.

The contributors considered four factors:

- The ethnic mix of the community. A considerable percentage of immigrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries were largely Catholic, and some ethnic groups were more inclined to Catholic schools than others.
- The size and growth of the Catholic population.
- The position of the local bishops. Some bishops were ardent supporters of Catholic schools, while others were not. In Boston, for example, the Catholic Church had influence in the public school system, so it was less inclined to support an alternative, Hunt said.
- The attitude of the local population toward Catholicism and Catholic schools in particular. Were they cooperative or antagonistic?

The research found urban Catholic schools were adaptable. When a student graduated from a parish school, they had to be able to survive in the public school system, so curriculum was designed to match, Hunt said.

"The schools did not want parents to have to choose between Catholic faith and making it in the future," he said.

Urban Catholic schools also were neighborhood schools and therefore reflected the community of the people who supported them. Decisions were not made by a superintendent downtown but by the clergy and to a large extent the parents, whose involvement and support was critical to the success of the parish school.

And finally, urban Catholic schools helped preserve religious identity.

"They were safe havens for a religious minority that, rightly or wrongly, didn't feel welcome in the public schools," Hunt said. "It became a question of identity."

Catholic education in America once thrived in urban centers, but more than 1,300 schools — mostly in cities — have shut down since 1990, according to a 2008 Fordham Institute study titled "Who Will Save America's Urban Catholic Schools?"

Hunt said the Fordham report inspired him and Walch to compile the book, and they focused the research on information up to the early 1960s and Vatican II, a time that marked a significant shift in Catholic identity in America and Catholic education.

"Since the time of Vatican II and the presidency of John F. Kennedy, many Catholics have moved to the suburbs and have become more part of the mainstream than they had been," Hunt said. "So the question of religious identity and ethnic identity, the difference between Catholics and non-Catholics in the last 40 years, has faded some."

Hunt has written nearly 100 articles and books on education, many of them with a focus on Catholic issues and education.

Urban Catholic Education is the 14th book Hunt has edited or written since joining the University of Dayton faculty in 1996. The book is available from Alliance for Catholic Education Press.

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