The Seton Option: Catholic Schools and Good Citizens

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ABSTRACT: Catholic schools have been in decline in number and population since the early 1960s, when more than 5.2 million students were enrolled in approximately 13,000 schools. Today, Catholic schools enroll only about 1.8 million students, or approximately 3 percent of the total school children in the United States. In the last major papal encyclical on education, *Divini Illius Magistri*, Pius XI argued that Catholic schools were essential for the health of the Church and for the making of good citizens. If this is right, then the decline of the Catholic schools should be a cause for concern and may have some explanatory power for thinking about various levels of civic disorder and political breakdown. I review a few of the existing studies on the relation between religious schools and citizenship, and I highlight areas for new research suggested by these reflections.

IN HIS DULLES LECTURE in March of 2017 on the social vision of Leo XIII in the twentieth century, Russell Hittinger explained that the "realist" paradigm of the Church for social order may be formulated as a revision of "the Aristotelian dictum: The human person is a domestic (matrimonial-familial) animal, a political animal, and an ecclesial animal."[1] This formulation is derived from the "three necessary societies" – so-called by Pius XI, who developed and advanced Leo's social vision: "Now there are three necessary societies," says Pius XI, "distinct from one another and yet harmoniously combined by God, into which man is born: two, namely, the family and civil society, belong to the natural order; the third, the Church, to the supernatural order."[2] Of these Hittinger warns: "Should these societies wither, we would have social problems. *A demise of the necessary societies would mark a social calamity*."[3]

What, then, contributes to the health and sustenance of these societies? The answer is obviously complex, since each society depends upon the other, and not in a simplistic part-to-whole relation. For instance, domestic society is certainly the smallest "cell" of civil society, but civil society is not the mere summation of

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[1] Russell Hittinger, "The Three Necessary Societies," *First Things* (June/July 2017): 19-26, at 20.

[2] *Divini Illius Magistri*, 11.

[3] Hittinger, 20 (emphasis mine).

many families. And while the family is *prior to* civil society in the order of nature, the family is not a complete society: she depends upon civil society to achieve the ends proper to her. Therefore, civil society can either "obstruct" or "aid" the domestic society – usually it does both. And families can supply or fail-to-supply what is needed for civil society – not merely bodies, but citizens, patriots, hard-workers, soldiers, inventors, statesmen, farmers, entrepreneurs, heroes, and saints.

Mediating institutions "mediate" because they sit between the individual and the state. The family is not a "mediating" institution, for it is the first and primary society. Rather, we can say that mediating institutions sit between domestic society and the state, and they populate civil society at various levels. Mediating institutions are the "stuff" of civil society. Individuals and families should not be "naked," as it were, before the state, but rather "clothed" with multiple layers of associations, loyalties, identities, communities, and so forth. These associations include schools, churches, clubs, recreational groups, arts, music and cultural associations, and so on. Importantly, the closer these layers of association are to the family, the more important they are to the health of individuals and the health of the three societies taken together. Thus, for instance, many a place of education, especially colleges, has affectionately been called *alma mater*. The Church is also *mater* (and *magistra*). Familial language – *mater* – is used to refer to the mediating institutions closest to the family, for their role is taken to be so important, so formative, as to be "like a mother." The Church is, of course, in the order of grace, a mother indeed. While the Church constitutes her own "society" – the ecclesial one – churches in general, and other religious institutions, are "parts" of civil society.

Already in 1931 Pius XI worried that mediating institutions were in such grave decline as to herald the near collapse of civil society and the demise of the state itself. In *Quadragesimo Anno* he wrote:

> When we speak of the reform of institutions, the State comes chiefly to mind, not as if universal well-being were to be expected from its activity, but because things have come to such a pass through the evil of what we have termed "individualism" that, following upon the overthrow and near extinction of that rich social life which was once highly developed through associations of various kinds, there remain virtually only individuals and the State. This is to the great harm of the State itself; for, with a structure of social governance lost, and with the taking over of all the burdens which the wrecked associations once bore, the State has been overwhelmed and crushed by almost infinite tasks and duties.[4]

In *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pius XI refers principally to labor associations – "industries and professions" – when he talks about the retreat of civil society. He

[4] *Quadragesimo Anno*, 78.

urges states then to encourage, through social policy, the re-establishment of guilds and workers' associations. But he begs and implores that these associations be thoroughly imbued with Christian principles. The central message of *Quadragesimo* is roughly this: "*two things are especially necessary [for the restoration of social order]: reform of institutions and correction of morals*."[5] Reform of institutions means principally that civil society should be repopulated with robust *mediating institutions.* Correction of morals means that institutions should assist in the formation of habits of heart and mind necessary for abiding in the third society: the ecclesial one. Put together, Pius's remedy is the reform of Christian institutions. He is unflinchingly blunt: "All experts in social problems are seeking eagerly a structure so fashioned in accordance with the norms of reason that it can lead economic life back to sound and right order. But this order ...*will be wholly defective and incomplete unless all the activities of men harmoniously unite to imitate and attain, in so far as it lies within human strength, the marvelous unity of the Divine plan.*"[6]

Quadragesimo Anno (1931) is usually studied on its own, but to do this is a mistake. In fact, it is the third document of a remarkable "triplet" in the social magisterium of Pius XI with *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929) – on Christian Education[7] and *Casti Connubii* (1930) – on Christian Marriage. The unity across this trio is striking, as is evidenced perhaps most dramatically by the fact that Pius XI's exposition of the three societies quoted above occurs not in *Quadragesimo* but in the first of these documents, the encyclical on Christian education. "Education is a social, and not a mere individual activity," begins the passage on the three necessary societies. Pius's formulation of things in *Divini Illius Magistri* is the same as that found in *Quadragesimo*: reform of institutions and correction of morals. Catholic schools, he argues, are necessary for the restoration of social order. They are necessary for the life of all three societies, domestic, civil, and ecclesial. And – this is critical – since the three societies are necessary for the state, Catholic schools are necessary for the state. In this, as in the framework of the three societies, Pius XI was following Leo XIII. Consider this from the 1885 encyclical *Spectata Fides*:

> For it is in and by these schools that the Catholic faith, our greatest and best inheritance, is preserved whole and entire. In these schools the liberty of parents is respected; and, what is most needed, especially in the prevailing license of opinion and of action, *it is by these schools that good citizens are brought up for the State; for there is no better citizen than the man who has believed and practiced the Christian faith from his childhood.* The

[5] *Quadragesimo Anno*, 77.

[6] *Quadragesimo Anno*, 136 (emphasis mine).

[7] *Divini Illius Magistri* is the most recent papal encyclical on Catholic education in general. John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* concerned universities and seminaries in particular.

beginning and, as it were, the seed of that human perfection which Jesus Christ gave to mankind, are to be found in the Christian education of the young; for the future condition of the State depends upon the early training of its children. The wisdom of our forefathers, *and the very foundations of the State*, are ruined by the destructive error of those who would have children brought up without religious education. You see, therefore Venerable Brethren, with what earnest forethought parents must beware of entrusting their children to schools in which they cannot receive religious teaching.[8]

Divini Illius Magistri develops this very theme, at even greater length than in *Spectata Fides*, including the theoretical argument about the three societies; there Pius XI aims to work out the assignment of rights and duties for education between the three societies. He locates primary responsibility for schools with the family and the Church (domestic and ecclesial societies), considered as a partnership between the natural and supernatural societies whose joint primary end is the salvation of their members. But he is quick to anticipate the objection that Catholic schools might ghettoize citizens or otherwise harm the state:

From such priority of rights on the part of the Church and of the family in the field of education, most important advantages, as we have seen, accrue to the whole of society. Moreover in accordance with the divinely established order of things, no damage can follow from it to the true and just rights of the State in regard to the education of its citizens.[9]

Beyond its theoretical arguments, *Divini Illius Magistri* is exceeded by few encyclicals in the social magisterium for its bracingly concrete remarks. For instance, Pius says: "unjust and unlawful is any monopoly, educational or scholastic, which, physically or morally, forces families to make use of government schools, contrary to the dictates of their Christian conscience, or contrary even to their legitimate preferences."[10] He also rejects "co-education of the sexes," sex education, and naturalism in educational pedagogy (the view that the child is a blank slate without original sin). He even quotes a decision of the U.S. Supreme Court – to my knowledge the only time this occurs in the documents of the social magisterium.[11] Pius also argues that there is no such thing as a school that is religiously neutral: "the school...if not a temple, is a den."[12] Catholics are forbidden to send their children to non-Catholic schools unless they have a dispensation from the local ordinary.[13]

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[8] *Spectata Fides*, 4 (emphasis mine).

[9] *Divini Illius* Magistri, 41.

[10] *Divini Illius Magistri*, 48.

[11] *Divini Illius Magistri*, 37, on the rights of parents not to be forced into using government schools.

[12] *Divini Illius Magistri*, 78.

[13] *Divini Illius Magistri*, 79.

One conclusion is this: for the health and sustenance of the three necessary societies, there is at least one *necessary* mediating institution – the Catholic school. In itself Catholic schools are not sufficient, but if this component of Catholic education is understood integrally as requiring the active collaboration of Catholic families and the Church, the result is something that looks like a sufficient institution. Pius provides a vision of the whole when he says:

> Whoever refuses to admit these principles, and hence to apply them to education, must necessarily deny that Christ has founded His Church for the eternal salvation of mankind, and maintain instead that civil society and the State are not subject to God and to His law, natural and divine. Such a doctrine is manifestly impious, contrary to right reason, and, especially in this matter of education, extremely harmful to the proper training of youth, and disastrous as well for civil society as for the well-being of all mankind. On the other hand from the application of these principles, there inevitably result immense advantages for the right formation of citizens. This is abundantly proved by the history of every age. Tertullian in his *Apologeticus* could throw down a challenge to the enemies of the Church in the early days of Christianity, just as St. Augustine did in his; and we today can repeat with him: "Let those who declare the teaching of Christ to be opposed to the welfare of the State furnish us with an army of soldiers such as Christ says soldiers ought to be; let them give us subjects, husbands, wives, parents, children, masters, servants, kings, judges, taxpayers and tax gatherers who live up to the teachings of Christ; and then let them dare assert that Christian doctrine is harmful to the State. Rather let them not hesitate one moment to acclaim that doctrine, rightly observed, the greatest safeguard of the State."[14]

If the Leonine proposal is correct – that Catholic schools are necessary for the health and safety of the state – then we have new reasons to be concerned and new ways of thinking about the challenges facing us as citizens in the United States. Catholic schools have been in decline in number and enrollment since a peak in the early 1960s, when more than 5.2 million students, around 10 percent of school children, were enrolled in approximately 13,000 schools.[15] Today, Catholic schools enroll only about 1.8 million students, or approximately 3 percent of the total school children in the United States. Since 2006 – just over the last ten years – elementary school enrollments have declined 28 percent, and the total number of schools by nearly 20 percent. Curiously, 99 percent of Catholic elementary schools are co-educational, as are 70 percent of Catholic secondary schools. Less than three percent of the professional staff in Catholic schools are religious or clergy.

There is an extensive literature on Catholic schools in the fields of sociology and economics. Most of this research has focused on a single question: do

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[14] *Divine Illius* Magistri, 53, quoting Augustine, Ep. 138.

[15] Dale McDonald and Margaret Schultz, "United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2016-2017: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing" (2017). Retrieved from http://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic_School_Data/ Catholic_School_Data.aspx.

children in Catholic schools have better outcomes than those who do not, where "better" is defined according to standard measurable outcomes such as test scores, high school graduation, college matriculation, and in some cases longer-term labor market outcomes. This line of research was largely initiated by a 1982 study by Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore, in which the authors used the first data collection of the High School and Beyond (HSB) study to show that Catholic school students had higher test scores than public school students.[16] Three decades of intervening research have mostly discredited the original Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore thesis: the higher test scores observed routinely in Catholic schools are now mostly attributed to observed and unobserved differences between the students in Catholic schools and those in public schools, sometimes called "selection" effects. There is some agreement that Catholic schools have a positive impact on high school graduation rates and college matriculation[17] and on academic performance of urban minorities.[18]

But none of this is really the question we want to take up. If Catholic schools are the safeguard of the state, I suspect that it is not because they produce higher test scores, even if we would like that very much. The title of a well-known study by Bryk, Lee, and Holland gets closer to the right question: *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*.[19] This book-length study combined qualitative and quantitative evidence with some historical and philosophical background on Catholic schools. The authors aimed at understanding why it was that some students seemed to thrive in Catholic schools, especially minorities and disadvantaged students. The study itself is limited by common problems in religion research: most especially, a simplistic view of how religious schools might be different from other schools. But I am willing to forgive most of this for the sake of getting the question right. How might social science – bounded in any case by field-specific methods and practices – aim to get a sense of the relation between Catholic schools and the good of civil society and of the State?

I have no quick answer, but I would like to mention three studies from the economics literature – each for a different purpose.

First, Thomas Dee, an economist and associate dean of Stanford's Graduate School of Education, had a small but remarkable paper in 2005 that went mostly

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[16] Thomas Hoffer, Andrew M. Greeley, and James S. Coleman, "Achievement Growth in Public and Catholic Schools," *Sociology of Education* 58, no. 2 (1985): 74-97.

[17] William N. Evans and Robert M. Schwab, "Finishing High School and Starting College: Do Catholic Schools Make a Difference?" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 110, no. 4 (1995): 941–74.

[18] Derek Neal, "The Effects of Catholic Secondary Schooling on Educational Achievement," *Journal of Labor Economics,* 15, no. 1 (1997): 98-123.

[19] Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

unnoticed called "The Effects of Catholic Schooling on Civic Participation." He notes that "the promotion of adult civic engagement is one of the primary goals of public schools. And the putatively negative effects of private schooling on civic engagement provide one of the most fundamental motivations for publicly provided schooling."[20] He examines the effect of Catholic schooling on adult propensities to vote and volunteer. He finds substantially large and positive effects of Catholic schooling on voter turn-out, but nothing especially noteworthy in volunteer patterns. In one early version of this paper, he makes the following comment in his concluding remarks:

> [T]he evidence from [my] analysis does constitute a highly suggestive (though circumstantial) case that Catholic schools are actually better than public schools at promoting adult civic participation. Furthermore, since the case for the public production of schooling is based on the hypothesis that private schools are *worse* at promoting civic engagement, this qualified evidence may make a useful contribution to ongoing policy debates.[21]

Dee is saying that, in the face of an overwhelming presumption against Catholic schools, merely to have shown that they are not worse counts as an important finding.

From Dee's study I want to draw one important lesson: that to answer questions about schooling and the common good, social science will need to find ways to connect the experiences of children in schooling with adult behaviors. These outcomes need not be limited to "civic" ones. Successes in the labor market may be considered as well as successes in family life and religious participation – the other two societies.

A second paper worth mentioning does just this, but does not examine religious schools. In an ambitious long-term follow-up to the Tennessee Project STAR study (an experiment in the mid-1980s in which more than 11,000 students were randomly assigned to small- or regular-sized kindergarten classrooms), Raj Chetty and his colleagues show that "higher quality" kindergarten experiences are predictive of greater success, broadly measured, in adult life. They say: "Previous work has shown that small classes increased students' standardized test scores by about 5 percentile rank points in grades K-3...but the longer run effects were less impressive...falling to 1-2 percentile points in grades 4-8."[22] Then they say:

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[20] Thomas S. Dee, "The Effects of Catholic Schooling on Civic Participation," *International Tax and Public Finance* 12, no. 5 (2005): 605–25 (emphasis mine).

[21] Ibid.

[22] Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, Nathaniel Hilger, Emmanuel Saez, Diane Whitmore, and Danny Yagan Schanzenbach, "How Does Your Kindergarten Classroom Affect Your Earnings? Evidence From Project STAR," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, no. 4 (2011): 1593-1660.

"However, the end goal of education is not merely to increase test scores. We use test scores because we think they are a good proxy for lifetime outcomes. But no one has ever verified this assumption. The goal of our project was to fill this important gap by linking the STAR data to data on adult outcomes. We find evidence that kindergarten test scores are indeed very good at predicting later outcomes." What outcomes? Labor market earnings, but also college matriculation, likelihood of being married, living in a good neighborhood and/or owning a house, and saving for retirement. The study suggests that being in a higher quality kindergarten classroom increases your likelihood of being married by age 27.

From this paper I want to draw a lesson that builds on the first one: looking at adult (and child) outcomes that are more obviously linked to the goals of a good human life, such as a successful marriage, will give us a better sense of the relationship between Catholic schools and the common good. And so here is an obvious piece of research waiting to be done: apply the long-term adult outcomes question to the original Coleman, Kilgore, and Hoffer hypothesis.

A final study to think about is the 2008 paper by Jon Gruber and Dan Hungerman, subtitled "The Church vs. the Mall." They ask: What happens when the Church faces increased secular competition? This study examines the data on Church attendance and participation around the elimination of the so-called Blue laws, which had prohibited the opening of certain stores and restaurants on Sunday. The authors find that the elimination of the Blue laws is associated with declines in attendance, as well as falls in every other available measure of participation."[23] They find a significant and direct causal effect of increased "competition" for Sunday time on Church attendance and participation (including charitable contributions). Thus, Gruber and Hungerman show that secular institutions can and do have a deleterious effect on Christian ones. This has profound implications for schools, and it verifies the wisdom of Pius XI who warned: "Accordingly, unjust and unlawful is any monopoly, educational or scholastic, which, physically or morally, forces families to make use of government schools."[24]

But here is an interesting thing for the scholar of education: many economists have looked at ways in which private religious schools provide "competition" for public schools by asking whether such competition makes public schools "better" (for example, more efficient, or higher quality). On the other hand, there has been no attention to the Gruber-Hungerman thesis as regards schools. What happens when religious schools face increased secular competition? What draws

[23] Jonathan Gruber and Daniel M. Hungerman, "The Church versus the Mall: What Happens When Religion Faces Increased Secular Competition?" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 2 (2008): 831-62.

[24] *Divini Illius Magistr*i, 48.

students and families from religious to secular schools? These are important research questions and the answers are not obvious. Churches and religious people are fond of identifying the unfair advantage created by public school financing: how can you compete with something that is putatively free? And yet, it happens all the time. There are many products that are free (or close to it) that have a very small market share because they are considered inferior goods. What kind of goods are these various types of schools? It often seems to me that both religious persons and secular persons think of schools as basically interchangeable goods with small "flavor" differences. But in fact we know very little about the real substitutability of these goods, yet we make all kinds of assumptions about how they are related to each other, or how they might in the future relate to each other. There is a tremendous amount of interesting work that can be done to advance our understanding of what the educational "product" really is, in the end. Some of my own work has gone so far as to ask whether there is any objective product at all – but only perhaps a relational product defined by a dyad.

There has been a great deal of interest in the last few decades – dating at least as far back as MacIntyre's *After Virtue*[25] and evidenced now in our conversation on Dreher's *Benedict Option*[26] and the various contemporary challenges to citizenship – on the question of whether and to what extent Catholics can accept the terms of citizenship in a political regime that provides a constitutional defense of the slaughter of innocents. This debate hangs on various questions related to political liberalism and the extent to which the American project is bound up with the same. But this interest in the "political" question (as compared with, say, the mid-century era in which Catholics seemed quite overcome with how well things were going) has struck me of late as a little bit misplaced, or perhaps out of order.

What I mean is this: let's say for the sake of argument that there is some ambiguity as to the question of Catholics and the American political enterprise. Let's also say, after reflecting on the last major encyclical on Christian education, that there is absolutely no ambiguity about whether and to what extent Catholics can participate in the system of government schools sometimes favorably called "public schools." If this is the case, then the three percent number is a pretty good measure of our correspondence to a necessary norm of Christian life. How can we work out our obligations with respect to things that are ambiguous – the place of Christians in American political life – when we have not been able to carry out a much simpler task, which is to protect and maintain the strength and vitality of Catholic schools?

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[25] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[26] Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017).

The logic of *Divini Illius Magistri* is that Christian schools are prior to the state in a certain sense, since they are a proper activity of families and Churches, each of which is prior to the state. Therefore, questions about the "political" question are downstream from the success or failure of Christian schools. What we are seeing now is quite likely the playing out of a sequence predicted perfectly by Pius XI in his letter on the Third Reich: "The Church cannot wait to deplore the devastation of its altars and the destruction of its temples, if an education, hostile to Christ, is to profane the temple of the child's soul.... Then the violation of temples is nigh."[27]

But, one might object, can we really tease out what is the effect of a rotten political order, from what is the effect of a rotten educational order? Surely, at some point they become hopelessly entangled. One might even make a strong argument that a rotten political order gave rise to the rotten educational order – through, for instance, choking off religious schools in just the manner that Pius XI decries and that Gruber-Hungerman demonstrates. And this would be true.

But Catholic parents, clergy, and bishops bear responsibility too. The corrupt arrangement was accepted with precious little resistance, mostly willing to go along with the romance of the public school system. There were marches on Washington for women's rights, for civil rights, for unborn rights, but not for the rights of religious schools. It seems that we basically agreed with Tom Brokaw when he said that public schools are the "great common ground. Public education after all is the engine that moves us as a society toward a common destiny."[28] In fact, it is very difficult to find any religious or cultural leader of the last half century who has urged a complete severing of ties with the American public school system on the order of what is clearly required by *Divini Illius Magistri*. Even Alisdair MacIntyre, whose work has dealt extensively with questions of education and the common good, has not found reason to oppose the secularization of education.[29]

Perhaps, I say, we do not need a new Benedict. Perhaps we need a new Elizabeth Seton.

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[27] *Mit Brennender Sorge*, 39.

[28] Pam Dudding-Burch, "Locals Celebrate National School Board Appreciation Month," *News Journal* (2018). Retrieved from https://radfordnews journal.com/feed/locals-celebrate-national-school-board-appreciation-month/.

[29] MacIntyre has many works on education, but for a good overview with references, see, for instance: Alasdair MacIntyre and Joseph Dunne, "Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 1 (2002): 1-19.