

Catholic education: Does it still make a difference?

Mary Gautier | Oct. 24, 2011
Catholics in America



Taylor Sparks prays during the first day of school at Our Lady of Fatima School in New Castle, Del., in August 2010. (CNS/The Dialog/Don Blake)

Education

We have asked about attendance at a Catholic school or college several times since we began this series of studies of American Catholics. The questions were included in 1993 and 2005 as well as in this 2011 survey. The results have been very consistent with what we know about access to Catholic education over time. In general, pre-Vatican II Catholics had relatively good access to Catholic education: About four in 10 attended a Catholic elementary school, one in four attended a Catholic high school, and one in 10 attended a Catholic college.

Likewise, Vatican II Catholics also had good access to Catholic schools. Half of that generation attended a Catholic elementary school, about a quarter attended a Catholic high school, and about one in 10 attended a Catholic college or university.

In the 2011 survey, for the first time we have enough millennials to begin to measure the impact of the tremendous demographic changes that we describe in other essays here. We also have a sufficient number of Hispanic Catholics to measure access to Catholic education on that aspect as well. This essay takes a first look at some of those differences.

Overall, 37 percent of Catholics in our sample attended a Catholic elementary, middle or junior high school and half of them attended for at least eight years. One in five attended a Catholic high school, on average for four years. About one in 10 (8 percent) attended a Catholic college or university, with half of them attending at least four years.

By generation, 29 percent of millennials attended a Catholic elementary school, compared to 31 percent of post-Vatican II, 48 percent of Vatican II, and 44 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics in this study. Similarly, 15

percent of millennials attended a Catholic high school, about the same as post-Vatican II (17 percent), but less than Vatican II or pre-Vatican II (24 percent and 27 percent). The pattern is similar for Catholic college or university attendance, although the difference among generations is too small to be meaningful.

This survey also provides us with our first clear look at the difference between Hispanics and non-Hispanics in access to Catholic education. Although there were too few pre-Vatican II Hispanics to sample, we do have sufficient numbers in the other three generations to compare. As [Table 9](#) shows, Hispanic Catholics of any generation are never more than half as likely as non-Hispanic Catholics of the same generation to have attended a Catholic school at any level.

When we separate the 2011 survey into Hispanics and non-Hispanics, the differences in Catholic education are striking.

[Table 9](#) displays the expected distribution for Catholic education among non-Hispanic Catholics of the pre-Vatican II and Vatican II generations, just as we have seen in the 1993 and 2005 surveys: About half attended a Catholic elementary school and about a quarter attended a Catholic high school.

Post-Vatican II and millennial Catholics, however, are less likely than the generations that preceded them to have attended a Catholic elementary school. They would have been in elementary school in the 1980s and 1990s, a time of immense social and economic change. Their parents, among the many Catholic families that had moved out of the cities and into the suburbs, out of the RustBelt and into the Sun Belt, were learning firsthand that building and staffing new Catholic schools to meet the demand was prohibitively expensive. Instead, many of them opted for more readily available and less expensive public school, combined with parish-based religious education. These two generations were also a little less likely to attend a Catholic high school, although the difference between them and the two older generations is within the margin of error. There is no difference in the likelihood of attending a Catholic college or university.

We report on some education and earnings differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics in another essay ([see story](#) [1]). Here we take another look at those same variables, to see if Catholic education makes a difference. What we see in the data is that for non-Hispanics, having attended a Catholic elementary school is not associated with graduating from college or achieving a household income of \$75,000 or more. Attending a Catholic high school is only modestly associated with these two outcomes.

Among Hispanic Catholics, though, there is a stronger association between Catholic schooling and socioeconomic success. Hispanics who attended a Catholic elementary school are twice as likely as those who did not to have a college degree and a household income of \$75,000 or more. The association is even stronger for those who attended a Catholic high school. We are not suggesting that Catholic schooling causes success later in life -- certainly there are many other intervening factors -- but the comparisons here are worth noting. Catholic schooling does make a difference for Hispanics.

Behaviors and attitudes

Does Catholic schooling make a difference in the way Catholics practice their faith and in their attitudes about the church? If so, do these differences hold for Hispanic Catholics as well as for non-Hispanic Catholics?

The data show that, at least in terms of the way Catholics practice their faith, attending a Catholic high school makes a difference. For example, among non-Hispanics who attended a Catholic high school, three in four are registered in a parish, compared to 62 percent of those who did not attend a Catholic high school. Among Hispanics, seven in 10 of those who attended a Catholic high school are registered in a parish, compared to less than half of those who did not attend. Non-Hispanics who attended a Catholic high school are also more likely than those who did not to attend Mass more than monthly (49 percent compared to 38 percent), to pray at least

daily (66 percent compared to 46 percent), and to rank as highly committed on our commitment scale (28 percent compared to 17 percent).

When asked about why they attend Mass, Catholic schooling also makes a difference. Hispanic Catholics who attended Catholic elementary school are more likely than those who did not to say they attend because they enjoy experiencing the liturgy (88 percent compared to 68 percent) and they are less likely to say they attend out of habit (36 percent compared to 46 percent). For both Hispanics and non-Hispanics, about a quarter of those who attended a Catholic elementary school, compared to about a third of those who did not, say that they are too busy to attend Mass more often than they do.

Attending a Catholic school also makes a difference in some aspects of Catholic identity, especially among non-Hispanic Catholics. Six in 10 non-Hispanic Catholics who attended a Catholic elementary school (and seven in 10 of those who attended a Catholic high school) say they would never leave the church; less than half of those without Catholic schooling said the same. More than half of non-Hispanic Catholics who attended a Catholic high school, compared to three in 10 who did not, agree that being Catholic is a very important part of who they are. Four in 10 non-Hispanic Catholics who attended a Catholic high school, compared to three in 10 who did not, strongly agree that it is important to them that younger generations of their family grow up Catholic. Similarly, six in 10 Hispanic Catholics who attended a Catholic elementary school, compared to half of those who did not, agree as strongly with this statement.

Finally, attending a Catholic school makes a difference, particularly among non-Hispanics who attended a Catholic high school, in the importance of a number of belief statements about the church. Non-Hispanics who attended a Catholic high school are more likely than those who did not to say that each of the items in Table 13 is very important to them as a Catholic. Hispanics who attended a Catholic high school are more likely than those who did not to say that the sacraments and the church's involvement in social justice are very important to them as a Catholic. They are less likely than Hispanics who did not attend a Catholic high school to say that the teaching authority of the Vatican is very important to them as a Catholic.

Summary

Catholic schools are less available now than they were 50 years ago and fewer Catholics are sending their children to a Catholic school. Catholics remain conflicted about their value, expense, necessity and efficacy. Nevertheless, the data show that attending a Catholic school does make a difference in many aspects of Catholic identity and practice. For Hispanics in particular, Catholic schooling can also make a difference in socioeconomic status.

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TABLE 9



DID YOU EVER ATTEND A CATHOLIC SCHOOL OR COLLEGE FOR ANY OF YOUR EDUCATION?

Percentage "Yes" in 2011

	Non-Hispanic				Hispanic			
	Pre-Vatican II	Vatican II	Post-Vatican II	Millennial	*Pre-Vatican II	Vatican II	Post-Vatican II	Millennial
Elementary, middle, or junior high school	44%	54%	40%	39%	N/A	28%	18%	17%
High school	26	27	23	21	N/A	11	7	8
College or university	12	10	11	12	N/A	6	3	1

*This group was not surveyed.

TABLE 11

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR HISPANICS IN EDUCATION AND INCOME OUTCOMES

	NON-HISPANIC				HISPANIC			
	CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY		CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL		CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY		CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL	
	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
College graduate	40%	30%	43%	31%	21%	10%	26%	10%
Household income over \$75,000	46	44	52	42	23	11	33	11

TABLE 13

AS A CATHOLIC, HOW IMPORTANT TO YOU IS EACH OF THE FOLLOWING?				
Percentage responding "Very important"				
	NON-HISPANIC ATTENDED CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL		HISPANIC ATTENDED CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL	
	YES	NO	YES	NO
Jesus' resurrection from the dead	80%	66%	75%	81%
Sacraments, such as Eucharist	73	57	75	65
Mary, the mother of God	69	57	66	71
Regular daily prayer life	57	38	47	53
Teachings that oppose abortion	51	31	54	49
Teaching authority of the Vatican	36	24	24	39
Church involvement in social justice	33	27	51	40
Teachings that oppose the death penalty	29	19	51	44

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Links:

- [1] <http://ncronline.org/node/27171>
- [2] <http://ncronline.org/AmericanCatholics>
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