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# Gravissimum Educationis. Golden Opportunities in American Catholic Education 50 Years After Vatican II

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*GRAVISSIMUM EDUCATIONIS. GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES IN AMERICAN CATHOLIC EDUCATION 50 YEARS AFTER VATICAN II.*

EDITED BY GERALD M. CATTARO AND CHARLES J. RUSSO.  
NEW YORK AND LONDON: ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD, 2015.  
ISBN 978-1-4758-1097-4 (PAPERBACK). 172 PP. \$34.00.

The ten articles in this book are: “Catholic Schools: Purpose, Presence, and Prophecy,” by Gerald M. Cattaro; “A Legal History of American Roman Catholic Schools,” by Charles J. Russo; “Church Documents: Vatican and US since Vatican II,” by Dale McDonald; “Declaration on Christian Education Encourages Catholic Schools: Lay Governance Increases to provide Support and Leadership for Them,” by Regina Haney and Karen Ristau; “American Catholic Higher Education: A Qualified Success Story,” by Michael J. Garanzini; *Gravissimum Educationis* at the 50-Year Mark: Catholic Schools and the Preferential Option for the Poor,” by Shane P. Martin and Jordan Gadd; “Faith-Based Schools: Ecumenical Schools and their Implications for the Future of American Catholic Education,” by Bruce S. Cooper and Ming Zhu; “Catholic Schools and the Common Good,” by John J. Convey; and “Epilogue and Recommendation,” by Charles J. Russo and Gerald M. Cattaro. I shall merely indicate some significant milestones and issues.

The 1884 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Council of Baltimore decreed that all parishes in the US construct Catholic schools and each diocese to establish a commission of examination (mainly clergy) to oversee these schools. These Catholic schools served the Catholic immigrant ethnic populations, becoming a vital source of acculturation and social upliftment. In 1965, the year of *Gravissimum Educationis* (henceforth GE), there were 10,667 Catholic elementary schools in the US with over 4,431,000 students; numbers began to decline after (see below). At the same time, there were 240 Catholic institutions of higher learning, enrolling 410,000 students; today the same number enrolls 950,000 students, 65% of whom are Catholic (p. 102). GE insisted on the primary right of parents to educate their children. The goal of Catholic education is to prepare students for both earthly and heavenly citizenship, thereby fostering the maturity of the whole person in every aspect - intellectual, moral, religious, social and civic – (pp. 46-47). GE itself did not deal with school governance, but lay governance and school boards arose because better poised to mediate between Church and government and to seek and receive funds from government and social bodies.

Important documents from the Congregation for Catholic Education include *The Catholic School* (1977); *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools* (2013); and *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion* (2014). Saint John Paul II in 1990 issued *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* that insisted on what makes a university Catholic, hallmarks being integration of faith and reason and explicit fidelity to the Church’s teaching and magisterium. Among important documents of the US Bishops’ Conference are *To Teach*

*as Jesus Did* (1972) and *Renewing our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium* (2005).

“Catholic schools are especially effective in making a difference in closing the achievement gap for poor and minority students in urban areas” (p. 65). They are “more effective than public schools in educating African American students...” (p. 66). “Catholics now comprise one of the best educated and financially secure groups in the United States” (p. 151). Students of other faiths, especially Muslims, find Catholic institutions safe places, places of integration of intellectual growth with spiritual growth (p. 103). Unlike their Protestant counterparts (the Ivy Schools) which went secular, Catholic higher institutions have remained largely Catholic. Some reasons are their connection with a founding religious community, the stress on mission and identity, and theology as an important discipline in the Catholic university.

Catholic elementary schools have been in decline since 1965. Today there are only 5,399 elementary schools with 1,392,000 students (p. 7). At the same time, home schooling continues to grow and expand (p. 133), other religious groups (Jews, Muslims, Evangelicals...) are opening private schools in cities and suburbs so their children can be brought up “in the faith” (p. 135). A persistent issue for the Catholic school is cost and affordability. Overheads rose sharply when poorly remunerated religious and clergy abandoned elementary and high schools for direct “pastoral work.” Demographic shifts depleted inner-cities with large Catholic populations, leading to the closure of parishes and parish schools. The new Hispanic immigrants (currently 17% of the US population) send their children to the affordable public schools. Charter schools compete and are often publicly funded. Many Catholic schools and colleges face a situation where a majority of their students are from wealthier families; they are having to do soul-searching about the vocation of the Catholic school for the preferential option for the poor and the less fortunate. A successful example is the Cristo Rey Network (28 urban schools with 9,000 students nationally, 96% being students of color) which enrolls only low-income students and includes work experience as part of the curriculum. A way to the future of the Catholic school may lie in the charter school, vouchers to parents to send their children to a Catholic school, large-scale funding from alumni and lay groups, and shared ownership and leadership with the laity. The Church must also find an inroad to the large-scale education of Hispanics who will soon reach a quarter of the US population.

*James Chukwuma Okoye, C.S.Sp.*