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**Becoming Young Women of Faith and Purpose:
Catholic Schools for Girls and Educating for Civic Engagement**

Catholic schools for girls are not anachronistic models of schooling; rather they have the potential to educate new generations of engaged and committed women. All-girls' Catholic schools take what is advantageous about Catholic schooling and single-sex schooling and educate girls for leadership in democratic society. Because of spiritual practices that engage young women in the world, a faculty committed to their success as leaders, and a culture of support in a church that excludes them, Catholic schools for girls educate for civic engagement better than other kinds of schools can.

Public schools in the United States provide students with an education that establishes basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills; in addition, they prepare young people for careers or college education and socialize young people as American citizens. They do this in co-educational schools that are touted as models of democracy and equality. Catholic schools¹ have these same goals and also work to educate for Christian faith; in addition, Catholic schools have a long tradition of educating in both co-educational and single-sex environments. Both public and Catholic schools accomplish their goals not only in the classroom but also in the structures and culture that are nurtured at the school. And it is the organizational structures and school culture that teach students as much or more about what it means to be a part of the American experience as anything in the classroom.

This paper argues that all-girls' Catholic schools are particularly well suited for preparing young women for civic engagement and leadership in society because of an implicit curriculum² that is oriented toward solidarity and service and is committed to teaching leadership. Single-sex Catholic schools for young women take what is shown to be advantageous about Catholic

¹ For further information about the history of Catholic education in the United States, please see: Harold A. Buetow, *The Catholic School: Its Roots, Identity, and Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1988). The National Catholic Educational Association also published a very useful book on the history of parochial schooling in the US: Timothy Walch, *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education From Colonial Times to the Present* (Washington, DC: NCEA, 2003).

² Robert Dreeben uses the term “hidden curriculum” to describe the lessons that a school teaches through its culture and values. Dreeben was the first to note that schools had an explicit curriculum (what it consciously taught through coursework and extra-curricular activities), a hidden curriculum (what it taught through its culture and values), and a null curriculum (what it taught through what it chose not to teach). I have chosen to substitute the term “implicit curriculum” for his concept of the hidden curriculum because it better conveys the sense of both the intentionality and the pervasiveness that the culture of a school has. Hidden tends to imply secret (as if we are trying to manipulate students) or lack of intention (as if school culture is a mysterious accident). The implicit curriculum of the school is intended to teach students important lessons about the values of the school in ways that support and complement what happens in the explicit curriculum of the classrooms. See Robert Dreeben, *On What Is Learned in School* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1968).

schooling³ and single-sex schooling⁴ and provide a context in which girls can grow to be engaged members and leaders in a democratic society. By providing them with spiritual practices that engage them in the wider world, a faculty committed to their success as leaders, and a culture of support in a church that excludes them, Catholic schools for girls educate young women for civic engagement better than other kinds of schools can. Catholic schools for girls must not be dismissed as anachronistic models of schooling; rather their potential for empowering new generations of engaged and committed women must be recognized.

Catholic Schools: Educating for Civic Engagement

In their landmark study, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland argued that Catholic schools do a better job educating high school students across a variety of outcomes.⁵ Of particular interest is what they discovered about the effect of a Catholic school's organization and culture on Catholic school students. Unlike the public high schools they had studied, they found that Catholic schools intentionally tried to cultivate a less bureaucratic and more personal school culture. Naming this culture as a communal organizational culture, Bryk and his colleagues believed that this organizational culture laid the foundation for the successes that Catholic schools evidence.⁶ In order to understand the features of this communal organizational system, the authors investigated how a Catholic school's values and traditions and its adult-student interactions all worked together to create a culture that would foster student growth.⁷ They found that, rather than an inward turn focusing on the school itself with a distrust of the wider society, Catholic schools fostered a community that was both supportive of its members and open to the world.

[The] Catholic school takes seriously the ideal of advancing the common good based on a larger conception of a properly humane social order. The formation of each student as a person-in-community is the central educational aim of these schools. From this perspective, schooling involves more than conveying the acquired knowledge of

³ Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 11.

⁴ Whitney Ransome and Meg Milne Moulton, "Why Girls' Schools? The Difference in Girl-Centered Education," *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 29, no. 2 (December 2001): 591. See also: Nicole Archard, "Developing Future Women Leaders: The Importance of Mentoring and Role Modeling in the Girls' School Context," *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 20, no. 4 (November 2012). Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland, "Single-Sex versus Coeducational Schools," in *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Cornelius Riordan, *Girls and Boys in School: Together or Separate?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990).

⁵ Bryk, Lee, and Holland's book was published in 1993 using data from the *High School and Beyond* survey, a national survey of sophomore and senior students at public, private, and Catholic high schools in the mid-1980s. This book combined intensive analysis of the Catholic schools represented in the survey with in-depth fieldwork at Catholic high schools across the country. In the book, they argue that Catholic high schools have a distinctive academic plan and social organization that leads to higher teacher commitment, higher student engagement, and better student achievement. Ultimately, they argue, Catholic schools are successful because they educate the whole student – mind and heart – and that this is education for democracy and the common good. Despite the fact that this data and its analysis is now more than 20 years old, subsequent researchers have found that their conclusions still hold up. See, for example, Peter Meyer, "Can Catholic Schools Be Saved?" *Education Next* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 12-21. David T. Hansen, "The Moral Environment in an Inner-City Boys' High School," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 18, no 2 (2002): 183-204. Thomas H. Groome, "American Catholic Schools and the Common Good," *Momentum* 34, no. 2 (April/May 2003): 26-29.

⁶ Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 127.

⁷ Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 127.

civilization to students and developing in them the intellectual skills they need to create new knowledge. Education also entails forming the basic disposition for citizenship in a democratic and pluralistic society.⁸

Further, they found that Catholic schools tend to view themselves as examples of how society *should* be. Thus, one of the key goals of Catholic schools is forming students who are intellectually capable *and* prepared to be leaders and active participants in the world.

Picking up on this research, David Sikkink suggests that the communal structure and orientation of Catholic schools provides for an implicit curriculum that educates students for civic engagement better than public schools. Sikkink defines the implicit curriculum of the school as the “norms, expectations, values, and orientations” that are learned by students as they participate in the schooling process.⁹ He argues that a part of the implicit curriculum for public schools is an education in individualism, orderliness, and competitiveness. In addition, in large bureaucratic public schools, many students experience alienation from, rather than engagement with, their school community. Educating for civic engagement involves teaching certain skills, including social trust, sociability, and concern for the common good over individual interests. When a student’s high school experience does not involve the experience of these civic skills, they are less likely to be prepared to participate in the democratic life of society by putting collective needs ahead of personal desires.¹⁰ In addition, the experience of alienation in school teaches students not to trust in public organizations, not to expect these organizations to be places of solidarity and community, and that there is no relationship between a civic organization and the common good.

Drawing on the factors highlighted by Bryk, Lee and Holland, Sikkink argues that Catholic schools educate for civic engagement, noting that it is the conscious commitment to developing a community based on values, traditions, and personal interactions that makes Catholic schools successful at educating for civic engagement. The communal organizational culture of the Catholic school means that students are more likely to experience school as community, as a place of solidarity, as a place of concern for the needs of others. This focus on community is a better preparation for the kind of concern for the common good that civic engagement in the democratic process will ask of them.¹¹

The research done by Bryk, Lee, and Holland and by Sikkink draws attention to some of the benefits of Catholic schooling. However, one aspect of school culture that they do not consider is the issue of gender bias. Because Catholic schools exist in a dominant secular culture that still maintains structures and attitudes that discriminate against women and in a church that explicitly excludes women from some aspects of ministry and leadership, the ways that a Catholic school’s culture embody this gender bias must be taken seriously. While Bryk and his colleagues do consider the academic advantages of single-sex education, they do not consider the ways in which boys and girls attending the same co-educational Catholic school might experience school culture in different ways. Similarly, Sikkink identifies the alienation that can result from the implicit curriculum of a public school, but he does not consider how both public and Catholic schools can alienate girls because of the unacknowledged gender bias that exists there.

⁸ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, 289.

⁹ David Sikkink, “The Hidden Civic Lessons of Public and Private Schools,” *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* 7, no. 3 (March 2004): 343.

¹⁰ Sikkink, 345.

¹¹ Sikkink, 350.

Girls' Schools: Educating for Leadership

In 1991, the American Association of University Women first brought focus to the issue of gender bias in American public schooling; they argued that gender bias in coeducational schools led to decreased self-esteem, lower career aspirations, and decreased interest in math and science in girls.¹² Further research has demonstrated that public, co-educational schools can alienate and silence girls at a time in their lives when they should be finding their voices and connecting to their community. The implicit curriculum experienced by girls teaches them to be silent, to be on the sidelines, to be pretty, thin, and popular, and to hide their intelligence and interest in school.¹³ So, while girls seem to be doing well in schools – they earn higher grades, have fewer disciplinary problems, and are more likely to attend college – there are costs to the hidden lessons of education, including lower self-esteem, a higher tendency to choose traditionally female careers, and lower earnings at every level of education. Further, women are less likely to be heads of major corporations, to lead major universities, or to aspire to and achieve elected office.¹⁴

Single-sex schools for girls provide an interesting glimpse into an alternative way of educating young women for participation and leadership in the world. Valerie Lee and Anthony Bryk, pulling from the same data source that informed their study of Catholic schools, noted that girls who attend all-girls' schools experienced higher academic achievement, higher educational aspirations, and higher self-esteem.¹⁵ Similarly, a survey of alumnae of girls' schools reported that these women credited their girls' school experience with convincing them that women can accomplish anything they want, with helping them develop self-confidence and self-esteem, and with encouraging a focus on academics and the value of intellectual achievement.¹⁶ Girls' schools create a school environment where girls are encouraged to take risks, to see themselves as leaders, to resist pressure to hide or deny their intelligence and interest in school, to learn how to work collaboratively *and* compete fairly. Girls' schools counter the sexualization of girls and women in the media and provide a community where girls learn to be self-confident, supportive of each other, and capable of standing up to a dominant culture that glorifies early sexual experiences, attractiveness over intelligence, and self-centeredness.¹⁷

A significant factor contributing to girls' disinclination to seek leadership roles is the lack of female mentors and role models.¹⁸ Single-sex schools counter this by consciously providing girls with these female mentors and role models. Strong female role models among administration, faculty and the student body, combined with intentional teaching of leadership skills, provide young women with the support they need to access leadership positions both in school and after graduation.¹⁹ The formal and informal mentoring and role modeling that

¹² Wellesley College Center for Research on Women and American Association of University Women, *How Schools Shortchange Girls: A Study of Major Findings on Girls in Education* (Washington, DC: AAUW, 1992).

¹³ David Sadker, Myra Sadker, and Karen R. Zittleman, *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in School and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Scribner, 2009). Sadker, Sadker, and Zittleman, 21. These lessons are reinforced by an explicit curriculum that fails to include female role models or examples and extra-curricular programs that cultivates male leaders and heroes.

¹⁴ Sadker, Sadker, and Zittleman, 25.

¹⁵ Valerie Lee and Anthony Bryk, "Effects of Single-Sex Secondary Schools on Student Achievement and Attitudes," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 78, no. 5 (October 1986): 388-389.

¹⁶ Ransome and Moulton, 591-592.

¹⁷ Ransome and Moulton, 598-599.

¹⁸ Archard, 454-455.

¹⁹ Archard, 455-456.

happens in the all-girls environment also creates a culture where girls are encouraged to think of themselves as potential leaders in the school and in the world, to understand the importance of their civic engagement, and to be confident in their ability to take risks. In addition, girls are most likely to become committed to civic engagement when they have experiences of engagement through community service and the sense of solidarity that comes from working with others for a greater good.²⁰ Participants in service programs come to define leadership as collaboration, influencing, caring and giving voice, involving both action and cooperation.²¹ Further, girls who engage in programs that combine community service, civic engagement, and leadership report feeling empowered and finding their own voice. In community service, girls are exposed to diverse forms of leadership and, by engaging others in a variety of social locations, can become more aware of the challenges they face as women. With this awareness can come a deeper and more thoughtful focus on activism in the local community with the intentional purpose of making that community better.²²

All-Girls' Catholic Schools: Educating for Leadership in the Church and the World

All-girls' Catholic schools, drawing on what is unique about Catholic schools and about all-girls' schools, have the opportunity to equip young Catholic women to be active participants in both church and society. Like Catholic schools in general, all-girls' Catholic high schools maintain the structures and culture that support the civic engagement of girls. These schools intentionally embrace a system of values that are founded in the Christian faith. Students at all-girls' Catholic schools are choosing to affirm the Catholic nature of the school and the formation in Christian mission and values that they will receive there. The sense of community and solidarity that are established through shared traditions, religious and moral formation, shared community service and prayer opportunities all work together to create a focus on the common good. Like single-sex schools in general, all-girls' Catholic schools are places where young women can find female mentors and role models and learn the leadership skills that will make them effective participants in civic life. Most all-girls' Catholic schools are led by women; most of the teachers are women and all of the student leadership roles are taken up by girls. Catholic all-girls' schools cultivate supportive interpersonal relationships among students and staff and these relationships can provide girls with the mentoring relationships they need to see themselves as potential leaders. Further, like all single-sex schools for girls, the conscious focus on girls and their learning means that students are less likely to feel alienated in their school community and are, therefore, more likely to feel engaged in that community.

Among the potentially unique factors that Catholic all-girls' schools may contribute to educating young women for civic engagement are the girl-oriented spiritual practices that engage girls in their faith, the cultivation of a faculty particularly focused on creating a school culture where girls' leadership is deliberately fostered, and the experience of living in and challenging a largely patriarchal Catholic culture. First, the spiritual practices that an all-girls' Catholic school can employ are particularly well suited for educating young women for an orientation to the common good. Traditional liturgical celebrations are central to any Catholic school and these experiences are important in shaping the communal identity of the school. In addition, girls in all-girls' schools have the opportunity to engage in spiritual practices that increase their sense of

²⁰ Michael A. Hoyt and Cara L. Kennedy, "Leadership and Adolescent Girls: A Qualitative Study of Leadership Development," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 42, no. 3 (December 2008): 206.

²¹ Hoyt and Kennedy, 210-211.

²² Hoyt and Kennedy, 216.

connectedness to something larger than themselves and their sense of compassion and potential to lead.²³ These spiritual practices can provide them with skills for dealing with the challenges they will face as they seek to engage the world and work for the common good.²⁴ Further, service to the larger community is understood as a foundational aspect of the daily living of the Christian faith. At girls' Catholic schools, participation in service projects takes on the added dimension of leadership that is oriented towards the common good, building up the community, and empowering others.

Second, the faculty at an all-girls' Catholic school plays an important role in cultivating a school culture that nurtures girls for engagement and leadership. The teachers at an all-girls' Catholic school help girls to envision themselves as leaders in the world and the church and to develop the skills they need to accomplish this vision. When hiring, Catholic schools consider a candidate's fit with the school's mission along with professional competence; at the all-girls' Catholic school, this fit with the school's mission will also involve explicit commitment to an ethos of gender equity, a theological anthropology that values women, the leadership potential of women, and cultivating those skills in their students.

Finally, the all-girls' Catholic school provides girls with a context that implicitly challenges the patriarchal structures of society and the church. In the Catholic Church, women are explicitly excluded from some important leadership roles; underlying this exclusion is a theology of complementarity that claims that men and women have different natures and, therefore, different roles. In this understanding of human nature, complementary duality is inherent in the biology of men and women and, therefore, in the divine plan. This approach sees biological sex differences and argues from analogy for differences between men and women in their roles in the world.²⁵ This theological tradition argues that women, because of their gender, are not suited for and, therefore, not called to particular types of leadership in the church. Because they call into question the gender bias and sex discrimination of society – by enabling girls to see and reflect on experiences of gender bias and by encouraging them to take on leadership roles – the all-girls' Catholic school also challenges the gender bias present in the church. In a school where girls are told that they can achieve whatever they want and can be leaders in government, business, medicine, and education, it should be expected that girls would question their exclusion from leadership in the church. By calling a theology of gender complementarity into question, these schools are implicitly constructing a more equitable theological anthropology – one that sees each individual, female and male, as a concrete and unique expression of the image of God. This, in turn, compels the church to enlarge its understandings of leadership, ministry, gender, and, most importantly, God.²⁶ In addition, women serve as role models of leadership because they are, in fact, leaders in the church at an all-girls' Catholic school. Laywomen and women religious are heads of schools, pastoral ministers, and teachers of theology. Catholic all-girls' schools are able to point to actual and historical examples of women who challenge the patriarchal structures of society and the church and who understand changing these structures as beginning with engagement with society and the church.

²³ Dori Baker and Ned Edwards, "What Would Catherine of Siena Do? Spiritual Formation and the Brains of Adolescent Girls," *Religious Education* 107, no. 4 (July-September 2012): 373.

²⁴ Baker and Edwards, 386.

²⁵ Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 125.

²⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2009), 71.

In sum, Catholic schools for young women are uniquely situated to bring the communitarian organization and culture that is characteristic of Catholic schools into conversation with the focus on mentoring for participation and leadership in the world that is characteristic of girls' schools. In this intersection, Catholic girls' schools have the opportunity to create places in the Catholic Church where young women are especially valued and supported as they learn the skills necessary for active involvement in the pursuit of the common good in a democratic society. In fact, all-girls' schools may be at the vanguard for a new way of understanding the roles of women in the Catholic Church and in the wider society.

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