

Region's Catholic schools forged in strife

By William C. Kashatus

An Archdiocese of Philadelphia panel last week gave new meaning to the old saying that drastic times call for drastic measures, recommending that 45 of the region's 156 elementary schools and four of its 17 high schools be closed. The Philadelphia area, once home to the most extensive Catholic education system in the nation, has witnessed a 30 percent decline in parochial school enrollment over the past three decades, a period coinciding with revelations of sexual abuse among the region's Catholic clergy.

Interestingly, the founding of the city's parochial school system was also a drastic measure, and it was taken at a drastic time marked by nativist riots and an inflammatory debate about publicly funded sectarian education.

Between 1830 and 1850, Philadelphia's Catholic population soared from 35,000 to 170,000 due to a flood of immigrants from Ireland and Germany. Catholics scrambled to provide schools to swollen parishes as well as multilingual nuns who could teach the lessons of the faith. Meagerly financed by parishioners' donations and fees, the schools struggled to survive.

At the same time, Protestant re-

formers who emphasized education as a means of instilling democratic values began to develop free, tax-funded schools that were Protestant-controlled and undergirded by readings from the King James Bible.

As parish and public schools appeared in the same neighborhoods — with Catholic children attending both — education became a lightning rod for religious and ethnic tensions, and matters of faith and money became intertwined. In 1842, a group of Protestant clergymen formed the American Protestant Association in Philadelphia to alert the public, through lectures, publications, and revivals, to “the dangers of popery,” including control of the city's schools by a “foreign ruler in Rome.”

Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick tried to mediate the conflict by suggesting that Pennsylvania fund a separate system of Catholic schools, giving both Catholics and Protestants religious instruction and freedom of worship in separate schools. An alternative solution, Kenrick proposed, would be to allow Catholic children attending the city's public schools to use the church-sanctioned Douay-Rheims Bible instead of the King James, lessening the offense to their faith.

Not only did the Philadelphia school board reject both proposals; it also used Kenrick's latter sugges-

tion for propaganda purposes, charging that Catholics wanted to remove the Bible from public education altogether.

The controversy helped spark a series of nativist riots in the spring and summer of 1844, resulting in at least 20 deaths and more than 100 injuries. The predominantly Irish district of Kensington was decimated, and two churches and a convent were burned to the ground. Kenrick closed Catholic churches and schools and encouraged parishioners “to follow peace and have charity” throughout the violence, which was finally brought to an end by military force.

The riots led to the development of a distinct Catholic subculture in Philadelphia, within which a parochial school system was established as a haven from the city's Protestant-controlled public schools. By the early 20th century, the archdiocese had established a thriving parochial school system, with more than 100 elementary schools, as well as Roman Catholic High School for Boys and John W. Hallahan High School for Girls. Philadelphia had become a model for Catholic education in America.

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