



Catholic Strategies to Maintain Connections Between
Faith Communities and Their Nonprofits: Findings from the
Faith and Organizations Project

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The Catholic agencies chosen for this study represent the manifold and varied ways the Church relates to its institutions. Several were directly related to their diocese:

- ❖ **Catholic Charities:** We studied one of the diocesan members of the umbrella association, Catholic Charities USA. There are 167 such member organizations – one for each Catholic diocese. Each diocesan member is directly subordinate to its bishop and is responsible for the various charitable services of the diocese. According to the *Catholic Charities 2008 Annual Survey*, nationwide, all 167 member affiliates administer or supervise 2,509 local Catholic Charities organizations. We visited and interviewed administrators and staff at both the local diocesan Catholic Charities headquarters and at several of its field agencies.
- ❖ **Parish schools:** We also studied two parish grade schools, St. Mary's in Virginia, and St. John the Baptist in Cincinnati, Ohio. Both are directly supervised by their local parish priest, and indirectly by their respective diocesan education office.

In addition, the following study agencies were affiliated with or sponsored by Catholic religious orders:

- ❖ **Two high schools:** Georgetown Prep in the Washington DC area and Seton High School in Cincinnati, Ohio were owned and sponsored by the Jesuits and the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, respectively.
- ❖ **Caroline Center** is a job-training program for inner-city women in Baltimore. It is sponsored and administered by the School Sisters of Notre Dame.
- ❖ **Catholic Hospital** (pseudonym) was originally owned and operated by the Sisters of X. It is now affiliated with a large Catholic health system, which supervises the hospitals formerly run by several religious orders.

Finally, we studied several agencies which, while originally or currently staffed by members of religious orders, do not have a formal affiliation with either the order or the Catholic Church as a whole:

- ❖ **St. Ambrose Center** is a housing agency in Baltimore which, while originally begun and staffed by the Jesuits, has since become independent of all formal Catholic ties. Its head, however, and several of its older volunteers and employees are Catholic, and a residual Catholic culture remains because of this.
- ❖ **Our Daily Bread** provides a hot meal daily to several hundred homeless people in Cincinnati. It was begun by a Catholic laywoman and a Catholic sister is currently the administrator, but it has no formal affiliation with any denomination or faith. Many local Catholic parishes, however, do provide volunteers and food.
- ❖ **The Women's Connection** in Cincinnati was founded by a Sister of Charity, and a few other sisters volunteer there, but it, too, has no formal church affiliation.

Catholic Practical Theology

The longstanding involvement of Catholics in teaching, healing, and social ministries has roots in their underlying belief that this is a way of working for their own salvation and for the salvation of others. The idea that one would save one's own soul by tending the needs of the poor and the sick is based on the "Last Judgment" scene of Matthew 25 – "Whatsoever you did to the least of my brothers, you did to me." The sick and the poor were considered literally to be Jesus

Christ. As one interviewee put it (quoting the Epistle of James), not to meet the bodily needs of the poor is to show that one's faith, one's religion, is actually dead. Catholic involvement in healing and helping the poor thus goes back literally to the foundation of Christianity. Education as a spiritual task came somewhat later, around the time of the Reformation.

Additionally, Catholics wished to save the souls of others. Since Catholicism in general has a more communal ethos than Protestantism, Catholics have tended to focus on saving groups or categories of people within their social context, rather than approaching individuals singly. Thus, Catholic hospitals were originally intended to foster repentance, penance for one's sins through acceptance of one's sufferings, and preparation for "a good death." Only secondarily were hospitals intended actually to heal anyone – the state of medicine was too primitive for that. Education was primarily to train the young in religious knowledge and good spiritual practices – only secondarily to teach secular subjects. According to the historian of Georgetown Prep, "Most importantly, the Jesuits of Georgetown regarded the Christian formation of students as their primary mission. Knowledge and skills, although important, were approached as a means to an end: the knowledge and love of God." Finally, social work was engaged in primarily to rescue poor families, single women, widows, and orphaned children from the danger of dissolute lives. In religiously pluralistic societies such as the United States, Catholics attempted to create an institutionally complete subculture meeting all of these needs, both as a shield from pernicious and secular influences and also to model "an integral Catholic culture and ultimately to convert the larger world to that culture" (Gleason 1995: 90).

In the mid-twentieth century, several changes occurred, both in the Catholic Church and in the larger society, which altered how this practical theology was expressed – and may, in some instances, have altered the theology itself:

- ❖ **U. S. Catholics became largely assimilated to middle-class American culture.** By the third and fourth generations after immigration, they earned approximately the same income and had the same level of education as the average American Protestant. They no longer needed – or wanted – to be protected from American society; they were part of it.
- ❖ **Hospitals, schools, and social service agencies became professionalized and bureaucratized.** State standards governed who could provide services, who could be served, and what kinds of services could be provided. Catholic schools, hospitals, and other agencies increasingly resembled other organizations in the same field (DiMaggio 1998).
- ❖ **The Second Vatican Council articulated a new language for expressing Catholics' relationship both to God and to the rest of humanity, as well as new rituals and iconography to embody it.** Hierarchy was de-emphasized in favor of seeing the laity as "the People of God," called equally with the clergy and religious orders to holiness and to leadership in the Church. The Council taught that salvation was possible for members of other faiths; the need to insulate the faithful from other religions or from secular society was ridiculed as "ghetto Catholicism" (Wittberg 2006: 120).
- ❖ **The Council document on "The Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*) urged all Catholics to become active in addressing the most pressing social needs.** These changes were reflected in the Catholic organizations in this study. At the same time, the older theology and practices also persist, mixing with newer rationales and images in a sometimes uneasy synthesis.

- ❖ **The new image of the Church as “People of God” removed Catholic religious orders from their supposed superior state of holiness and relegated (non-ordained) sisters and brothers to the status of laity.** The numbers of sisters and religious order priests and brothers fell precipitously, to the extent that few, if any, still serve in the schools, hospitals and agencies we studied. This was not merely a financial burden; it also removed a basic icon or symbol of the religious status of the organization. In most of the organizations we studied, our interviewees mentioned the impact of the loss of the sisters’, brothers’ and priests’ presence. Both parish grade schools, both high schools, and the hospital, all mentioned this. Newer agencies such as Caroline Center and The Women’s Connection, which were recently founded by religious orders of nuns, both worried what they would do when the current sisters on staff retired. They knew the sisters would not be replaced. The only two organizations *not* to mention this concern were Our Daily Bread in Cincinnati and St. Ambrose Center in Baltimore, which, as we will see, were unique in other ways as well.
- ❖ **Since most Catholics are no longer poor immigrants, they no longer need many of the services the institutions once provided.** The majority of the clientele of Catholic Charities/Catholic Social Services are not Catholic. As another example, the School Sisters of Notre Dame first came to Baltimore in the mid-19th century to educate the children of Catholic German immigrants. By the late 20th century, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of these immigrants had moved well into the middle class, and the neighborhood around their first school had experienced racial, religious, and economic transition. If the sisters wished to continue their original mission of educating the poor, they needed to focus on the residents of the inner city, who were, for the most part, *not* Catholic. The same situation applies to The Women’s Connection in Cincinnati.
- ❖ **State-mandated regulations, insurance standards, and other “isomorphic pressures” impact the organizations.** This was especially true for the hospital we studied. Uniform standards for Medicare and insurance reimbursement regulated services to patients and required nonsectarian standards for admission and treatment. Hospital executives (who were increasingly likely to be laypersons, or even non-Catholics, rather than members of the originally-sponsoring religious order) were expected to display business and administrative credentials rather than spiritual vision. Economic constraints made it difficult, and soon impossible, for a hospital to operate as a stand-alone facility, so it was absorbed into a large system with headquarters out of state. All this made it more difficult to retain a religious ethos. The *Catholic Charities 2008 report* notes the same situation holds for the diocesan Catholic Charities affiliates, which on average receive 67% of their funding from the government and only 3% from diocesan and church support. This government funding limits how “Catholic” Catholic Charities can be in its staffing and its daily operations. Between 85 and 90% of the staff at the large Catholic Charities agency in this study are not Catholic. The possibility of the eventual loss of their religious identity bothered some organizations, while others, like The Women’s Connection and St. Ambrose Center, did not feel it would matter. Still others, notably the two parish grade schools and Our Daily Bread, were adamant about retaining their religious founding vision – even to the point, for Our Daily Bread, of refusing to accept government money or to be part of the United Way.
- ❖ **The Second Vatican Council’s influence can also be seen in the reluctance of many of the organizations to advertise their Catholicity very strongly.** Sometimes, as with the Caroline Center in Baltimore and Our Daily Bread in Cincinnati, this may

have been to avoid offending their clientele who were not Catholics. But even at Georgetown Prep, whose student body is between 70% and 80% Catholic, one interviewee said “It is not a school whose foundation is oriented toward evangelization... I think during the course of their time with us, people find their own faith traditions stimulated so they find out more about their faith... But we are very comfortable in helping people to come to understand their own faith tradition better – to become more faithful persons within the context of their own faith.”

In spite of these changes, much also remains the same. The two grade schools remained strongly Catholic, with religious iconography, and near-100% Catholic faculty and students. Our researchers also noted that the students in all four schools were expected to perform some form of service to the poor – a reflection of a Catholic emphasis that goes back centuries, if not millennia. In other ways, too, the organizations’ religious character continues to surface: both Georgetown Prep and one of the parish grade schools had regular spiritual retreats for both students and faculty. At Georgetown Prep, there is also a program to train the students in the spirituality of St. Ignatius. Finally, most of the interviewees emphatically stated that they did not de-emphasize their organization’s religious identity in the community at large. The exceptions were Our Daily Bread (whose administrator admitted, however, that the organization’s very name advertised its religious roots) and The Women’s Connection in Cincinnati, and St. Ambrose Housing in Baltimore, which are becoming more secular as their founders pass from the scene.

Stewardship in Catholic Organizations

Stewardship refers to the faith community’s efforts to maintain its practical theology of justice and charity in the activities of its affiliated nonprofits. Catholic educational, health care, and social service organizations are typically connected to their sponsoring denomination via one of two routes: they are either directly owned and supervised by a diocese or parish, or else they are owned and/or sponsored by a religious order. The two parish elementary schools we studied fell into the first category; so does Catholic Charities. Each Catholic Charities is officially subordinated to the local diocese; the two parish grade schools are subject to the pastor of the church to which they are attached. Both high schools, one of the social service agencies, and the hospital fell in the latter category. Caroline Center, Georgetown Prep, and Seton High School are officially subject to the religious orders that founded them, but all three of these organizations have become separately incorporated in recent decades, while retaining some sort of “sponsorship” relationship to the founding order. The hospital is part of a national Catholic health care system, and is no longer subject either to the founding religious order or to the diocese – although a few members of the founding order do sit on both the hospital and the system board. Instead, the Catholic health care system is in the process of obtaining Vatican recognition as a “Public Juridic Person,” the Catholic Canon Law equivalent of incorporation. Once this status is established, the system itself will be the official link that insures the “Catholicity” of its component hospitals. How well this will insure the maintenance of the hospitals’ religious identity remains to be seen.

A few organizations (St. Ambrose Center, The Women’s Connection, and Our Daily Bread) are completely separate, and retain few, if any, formal ties to their original sponsors. This disconnection may happen to more of the religious order-sponsored organizations in the future. Our Daily Bread, St. Ambrose Center, and The Women’s Connection are completely separated from official ties to any religious entity, Catholic or otherwise. However, some local parishes and religious orders, as well as students and alumni from the orders’ schools do provide volunteers and some donations.

The only thing that can be said about the Catholic organizations we studied is that nothing in general can be said about them. The Catholic Charities branch we studied and the two parish grade schools are the most closely tied to diocesan structures, but even here, one school has an elected school board that mediates this tie and the other doesn't. Pastors and diocesan school superintendents vary in how closely they supervise local school policies and activities; the Midwestern parish school seems to use the diocesan school office more as a resource and a network of contacts than as a superior to which the principal felt he had to report. One of the interviewees at Catholic Charities noted that the bishops of the various dioceses also vary "enormously" in how closely they monitor the direction of Catholic Charities there.

The religious orders differ as well. The Jesuits who sponsor Georgetown Prep had a much clearer hierarchy and chain of command than two of the three women's religious orders, none of whose members would ever have said something like "I report to the Provincial Superior in Baltimore and he reports to the Vatican." The relationship of the third religious order to their hospitals adds an additional complication. Most Catholic hospitals are now folded into Ascension Health, Catholic Health Initiatives, Bon Secours, or another large, multistate health care system and are no longer owned or managed by their original orders. A sticky situation is that, while U.S. civil law recognizes the systems as owning and running their hospitals, Catholic Canon Law has, until now, considered the sisters' orders to be the "Public Juridic Person" that is officially in charge. So the sisters retain a presence on the hospitals' and the systems' boards, and final authority over a few "reserved decisions" like selling or closing a site. Currently, the largest systems are negotiating to be declared "Public Juridic Persons" in their own right. When this happens, the last official tie to the founding orders will be dissolved.

The orders have established various "sponsorship" relationships with their organizations, some of which are quite well-thought-out and detailed. The School Sisters of Notre Dame have recently (2007) established a "Sponsorship Review Process" to ensure that their overall mission and vision are consistent with how each of their sponsored organizations fulfills its separate organizational mission. To assist administrators and boards in preparing for their Sponsorship Review, a Sponsorship Coordinator has been appointed for all of the sisters' North American provinces. She has developed a series of workshops for the administrators of the order's schools and other institutions. Caroline Center is currently engaging in this process – the first non-school among SSND organizations to do so. Similarly, the Sisters of Charity (Seton High School) and the Jesuits have well-specified programs to help their organizations retain their founding religious identity and ethos. The health care system's sponsorship program is perhaps the most elaborate of all. It is a year-long program for the top- and now the mid-level administrators of all system hospitals:

We launched in 2004 our first group. It has a long name. It is called *Formation for Catholic Healthcare Ministry Leadership*. We abbreviate it to "our 2-year program"... The way it works is they basically take six courses over the two years. They come for eight retreats. The first is a week long. The subsequent ones are from Monday through Wednesday. One part of the retreat is a face-to-face with the teacher who has them on-line at that time so they get that face-to-face interaction. We do a lot of exposure to spiritual practices that will support them as leaders... They do a project for six months in their local health ministry. Those projects are tremendously variable, but very, very creative application of what they have learned. I will tell you real quickly, too, the courses they take. They take an introduction to theology. There are some basic concepts of Catholic theology like sacramentality and Trinity, and paschal ministry but what they really are getting is the concept of thinking theologically. Really looking at where the action of God is in their life.

Finally, the umbrella organization for all religious orders (the “Leadership Conference of Women Religious”) provides training and mentoring for sisters on how to set up and maintain sponsorship relationships with their organizations. An online listserv can connect a newly-elected superior of a member order to a mentor upon her request.

Another way in which the orders, Catholic Charities, and some of the parishes relate to their sponsored organizations is through membership on their boards of directors. Again, the patterns vary. Georgetown Prep’s board is largely composed of alumni, with a few Jesuits. The grade school’s board is all Catholic, and elected by parishioners. The Board of Trustees of Caroline Center includes 25 individuals, of whom 4 are sisters from the sponsoring order. The original board of St. Ambrose Center was an extremely informal group of the founder’s friends. The board of Our Daily Bread in Cincinnati includes persons from the local community who have a history of volunteering there. The Catholic Charities branch we studied has a two-tier board: a lower tier (for which being Catholic is not a requirement), and an upper tier composed primarily of diocesan officials. The former directs the day-to-day operations of Catholic Charities; the latter has a few reserved powers such as approving the slate of board candidates, approving the choice of CEO, and approving the final closing or sale of an organization. Another aspect of the stewardship relationship is whether the agencies have separate 501(c)(3) status. The grade schools and the subordinate units of Catholic Charities like Parish Partners do *not* have this status; most of the others do.

Maintaining Relationships

The differing structures of sponsorship influence how the various organizations address key issues. The orders have perhaps the most extensive and well-thought-out process of maintaining their relationship with their schools, social agencies, and hospitals – including regular retreats, periodic evaluation processes, and (for the health care system), a fully-fledged, year-long education program. Catholic Charities and the parish schools rely more on their integral links with the parish/diocese. Most of the organizations we studied operate on the same site as their religious sponsor, and there are certain doctrinal “lines in the sand” that are strictly enforced. Whether this is sufficient to keep the outlying agencies of Catholic Charities sufficiently “Catholic” remains to be seen. In completely separated agencies such as Our Daily Bread, The Women’s Connection, and St. Ambrose Center, whatever relationship to Catholicism remains is completely dependent on the continued presence of the (Catholic) founders – all of whom are older. All three organizations seem willing to let any residual Catholic identity lapse when the founder leaves. But they seem not to have completely realized the impact this might have on the informal support Catholics provide to them – the parish volunteer network at Our Daily Bread and The Women’s Connection, the financial investments of various religious orders in St. Ambrose Housing instead of in stocks or bonds, the free labor of the two sisters currently working at The Women’s Connection.

Organizational Transitions

The major organizational transition facing all of the organizations originally sponsored by the religious orders is the imminent absence of these orders. In some organizations (the two parish schools, most departments of the hospital), this has already occurred. In others (the two high schools, Caroline Center, The Women’s Connection) it is likely to happen within the next five or ten years. The second transition is the bureaucratization of all the organizations, as noted above. This is the reason for the orders’ extensive programs to train and educate their replacements in their practical theology (the official term is “charism”). It is also the reason for

the umbrella organization of sisters (The Leadership Conference of Women Religious) having such an extensive mentoring process for its component orders as they shed their former sponsored institutions.

Current Economic Situation

The current financial situation affects the organizations and the religious sponsors in two ways: by affecting their clientele and by affecting their own resources. Agencies such as Our Daily Bread, The Women's Connection, and especially St. Ambrose Housing have seen demands for their services increase significantly. So far, none of the three have indicated that they are unable to meet them, but they may face difficulties in the future. Several religious orders, as well as the diocese, have seen their own investments decline, which limits the amount of assistance they can provide. The four schools are largely dependent on tuition, so their enrollments have decreased as parents lose their jobs. Several schools have had to cut faculty because of this. Catholic Charities, the Caroline Center, and the hospital are heavily dependent on government grants and contracts, which are rising under the current administration. The hospital, of course, is feeling the strain which all health care organizations experience. None of the organizations we studied appear to be in imminent danger of closing, however.

To conclude, Catholicism lives up to its name in its relationship with its organizations. It is truly "universal" – spanning the gamut between tight control by the diocese or parish (and even here, the extent of this control varies across the country), to varying degrees of oversight by religious orders (some of whom are comfortable with "reporting to Rome" or to the bishop, others of whom would resist such reporting as an intrusion), to bureaucratic oversight by a distant health care system (with varying degrees and types of programs to educate and inspire administrators and lower level employees), to complete – and valued – independence from all formal religious control (while appreciating and benefiting from a variety of informal ties and assistance). While a common stereotype of Catholicism is that it is hierarchically controlled and centrally administered, in reality, there is much more variation in its relationship to its sponsored organizations than exists in any other denomination.

Implications for Practice

- ❖ **Catholic organizations which have not yet adjusted to the impending absence of the religious orders from their staff and administration – and even from their boards of directors – will soon have to do so.** For some of the order-sponsored organizations, especially the health care systems, this will mean arranging a new canonical status to codify their relationship to the larger Church. Some private schools – such as Georgetown Prep in our study – may face a similar need to codify their "Jesuit" status, once no Jesuits are present.
- ❖ **Independent organizations dependent on their founder's vision – such as Our Daily Bread, St. Ambrose Housing, and The Women's Connection in our study – will face significant changes in their Catholic identity once the founder dies or retires.**
- ❖ **The prevailing assumption even among Catholics that all Catholic organizations are funded by the local Catholic diocese causes fund-raising problems for those which are not.** Even Catholic funders – to say nothing of non-Catholic funders – typically overestimate the centralization of the Catholic Church.

- ❖ **As with other denominations, all Catholic organizations face pressures to become like secular organizations from government regulations, professional standards, and client and stakeholder expectations.** This makes it difficult for them to maintain a distinct and obvious Catholic identity – especially if their primary clientele are not Catholic.

Information about the Faith & Organizations Project

Since the late 1990s, practitioners and researchers from different faiths have been working collaboratively to understand the connection between faith communities and the non-profits they have created, sponsored or supported. The *Faith and Organizations Project* also has explored ways that faith traditions play out in organizational structure and practice, the role of faith based organizations in their service sectors, and faith based organizations' interactions with the people they serve.

This publication is based on findings from the Project's second study, *Maintaining Vital Connections Between Faith Communities and their Organizations*. The project was funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc., with research activities beginning in March 2008. It examines the relationship between faith communities and organizations founded by Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Evangelicals, Quakers, and African American churches in the Mid-Atlantic (Philadelphia and the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan areas), Midwest (Ohio and Chicago) and South (South Carolina). This report provides details on strategies to maintain connections for Catholics, outlines unique relationship challenges, and suggests practical ways that faith communities and their organizations could strengthen their relationship and ensure that faith based organizations receive appropriate support and guidance.

Our first report, *Overview Report on Project Findings*, offers a general summary of key project findings and contrasts religious strategies while our second report, *Comparing Strategies to Maintain Connections Between Faith Communities and Organizations Across Religions*, includes findings for all of the religious traditions in the study as well as an introductory overview of key concepts and a conclusion with comparative findings. A series of best practices documents on topics covered in both reports is in development. These products, along with publications from our pilot study and other information on the project, are available on the project website at <http://www.faithandorganizations.umd.edu/>.

Suggested Readings

For Catholic Schools:

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Walch, T. 1996. *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial times to the Present*. New York: Crossroad.

For Catholic Hospitals:

Farren, Suzy. 1996. *A Call to Care: The Women Who build Catholic Health Care in America*. St. Louis: Catholic Health Association of the U.S.

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Ursula Stepsis and Dolores Liptak, eds. 1989. *Pioneer Healers: the History of women Religious in American Health Care*. New York: Crossroad.

For Catholic Social Services:

Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown. 1997. *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

