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## A New (Old) Model for Catholic Schools

by Eric Pavlat

**This is the story of the rebirth of St. Jerome Catholic School as St. Jerome Catholic *Classical* School.** St. Jerome's parish, located in Hyattsville, Maryland, is an unusual case to begin with: Last year, it had 50 percent more baptisms than funerals, and it has four men currently in formation for the priesthood. But the transformation of their parish school may prove to be their most impressive achievement yet.

Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Washington have been in a precarious state. In 2009, rumors were swirling about closures and mergers. That October, the Archdiocese of Washington called Rev. James Stack, the pastor of St. Jerome's, to inform him that his school would have to go through a formal consultation.

Father Stack invited parishioners to attend the November meeting, and the parish turned out in force. There, school principal Mary Pat Donoghue, herself a St. Jerome's alum, described what the school was and why it was important to save it. The archdiocesan representatives, though impressed with the community turnout, explained that if the school could not come up with a compelling model for staying afloat, it would likely be closed.

What happened next was unexpected.

Multiple parishioners approached Donoghue and Father Stack, arguing that what the parish needed was a more rigorous curriculum and authentic Catholic spirit. One of the loudest of these voices was that of Michael Hanby, a professor at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family. Hanby had lately been introduced to a local homeschooling community's miniature school, known as the Crittenden Academy, which had inspired him to write an essay describing his philosophy on the subject. That November evening, attending the consultation and listening to the parish's presentation, he recalls thinking, "I'm not sure that the school they just described is really *worth* saving."

Following the meeting, Hanby sent a letter saying as much to Father Stack, including a copy of his essay on education and emphasizing that “a wonderful birthright [was] being denied” the children of the community. Students needed, he argued, “to love thinking and to have something noble to think about,” but Catholic schools had instead “drifted toward a public school model.” His essay, Donoghue recalls, presented “a good analysis of where Catholic education had gotten off track,” and she was impressed with its proposed remedies.

What was most amazing, though, was that it was a “beautiful fit” with a change she and Father Stack had already been contemplating since they’d attended a leadership consortium two weeks before the call from downtown: a school where rigorous curriculum was combined with authentic Catholicism without apology. “It was already clear,” Donoghue explains, “that [the old] model had run out of steam.” Hanby’s vision for education — along with other essays they read, including Dorothy Sayers’ “Lost Tools of Learning” — articulated a methodology for their goals “more fully and more completely” than she and Father Stack could do themselves.

Quickly, committees were formed. The finance committee managed to raise \$190,000 in the next several months, creating an operating surplus for the school year. The marketing committee slowed the attrition in school enrollment. But the most visible work came via the curriculum committee, which Hanby was immediately invited to join.

The committee was unusual in that one-third of its members homeschooled their children. “All parishioners are stakeholders, whether or not their kids are in the school,” says Donoghue, “because the school *is* a parish mission.” She was happy to have the homeschooling parents’ contributions based on their “expertise in curriculum.” It also helped that several committee members had themselves been school teachers or received classical educations.

The committee consulted curricula from classical schools around the nation. Members met frequently and worked fervently between meetings. They wrestled with such issues as the best way to teach science, the philosophical core of America’s founding, and, as Hanby puts it, “how to cultivate qualities of soul such as patience, memory, and wonder.”

**The result of their efforts is St. Jerome Catholic Classical School.** It is apparently the first diocesan Catholic school in the nation to re-found itself under a classical model, and only the second diocesan Catholic classical school in the nation (the first being the formerly Anglican Atonement Academy in Texas). The committee offered a 120-page curriculum to Donoghue, which she read and accepted without amendment. The new vision statement begins:

St. Jerome School educates children in the truest and fullest sense by giving them the necessary tools of learning and by fostering wonder and love for all that is genuinely true, good, and beautiful. We emphasize classical learning because we want our students to read well, speak well, and think well and ultimately because truth and beauty are good in themselves and desirable for their own sake.

Their K-8 curriculum is no longer scaffolded onto the public school model, but rather based on a chronological system that progresses through human history (Egyptian through modern and American) in K-5, and reiterates it at a deeper level in grades 6-8. It includes Latin, Gregorian chant (with training in a schola), Greek and Roman mythology and history, medieval philosophy (including St. Thomas Aquinas), the study of Renaissance art, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, *The Screwtape Letters*, and the Lincoln-Douglas debates, all integrated within a Catholic worldview.

The curriculum emphasizes the conviction that human culture expresses the natural desire for God, and that Christianity is therefore historically and culturally decisive. Curriculum committee member Rebecca Teti says, “Jesus Christ is the Lord of history, and God is the author of truth, beauty, and goodness. We wanted kids to see their unity, their connectedness to all people, and the goodness [Catholic] culture has brought to history.”

Hanby adds, “Christ cannot ultimately be the center of students’ lives if He is not at the center of history and existence and if He does not satisfy the longings implanted in them. The public-school-education-plus-religion-class model ends up reinforcing the impression that religion has little to do with real life. We wanted to overcome the separation of faith and life by showing how profoundly Christ and the Church have affected history and culture — and by giving students something better to love.”

At first, Donoghue was nervous about introducing their radical plans to the archdiocese. But when she was summoned to a meeting with school superintendent

Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill, Donohue was shocked when the superintendent said, "Mary Pat, I don't know if you've thought about this, but how about moving to a classical model for your school?" The conversation moved smoothly after that. When Weitzel-O'Neill later left the position, her successor, Deacon Bert L'Homme — himself a former member of St. Jerome's school board — also embraced the new model. He ended up preaching the homily at the first Mass of the new school year.

**There were eight new hires this school year**, more than any other in recent memory, and the new teachers "came out of nowhere," says Donoghue; she never had to go out recruiting. People heard what the school was doing and called to ask if they could be part of it. One teacher had experience at the Crittenden Academy; several others, graduates of the University of Dallas and Thomas Aquinas College, had recently moved to Hyattsville at the urging of Chris and Susie Currie, who spearheaded both Crittenden and a tight-knit Catholic community in the area.

The change, of course, has not come without complaint. Some have worried that the curriculum implies that the classical model is the only way to be "Catholic." Donoghue's response to this fear? "It is not the only way," she agrees, but holds her ground that "the classical approach best captures what the Church teaches about teaching." Hanby adds, "'Classical' isn't just a method; it's a theological judgment about the meaning of human history. This is what separates St. Jerome's model from other classical approaches." There were also scuffles over whether including the word "Catholic" in the name would make it too unwieldy, but the pastor and principal eventually made the decision to be explicit.

Meanwhile, the shift has also attracted a surprising amount of attention. Stories about St. Jerome's have appeared not only in D.C.'s local Catholic newspaper, but also on the Ignatius Press and Faith and Family blogs, with other interviews on the horizon. Former superintendent Weitzel-O'Neill, now at Boston College, has been spreading the news about St. Jerome's new curriculum; consequently, the school will present its model at an upcoming conference of the National Catholic Education Association. Donoghue has received telephone calls from schools and families as far away as North Carolina and Minnesota, while Currie is now using the school's reform as yet another way to attract people to Hyattsville.

Already, the attrition rate in registration has slowed considerably: St. Jerome's has already surpassed last year's projections for enrollment this term, and they have an

unusual number of inquiries about next year. According to Donohue, “We’re in the black.” In the future, the school plans to provide additional training for its teachers; to add a class in formal logic; and to improve, promote, and share their curriculum, making it available for Catholic schools and homeschoolers nationwide. In this way, they have the potential to lead a national revitalization in Catholic classical education.

Still, there is work to be done: The school building was constructed in 1943, and its current décor and condition do not match the school’s mission statement. Hanby’s view is that the task of a Catholic school is no less than “the development of the human person,” and a beautiful and thoughtful learning space is vital to that mission. Such changes at St. Jerome’s are impossible under the current budget, but the school is hoping to attract benefactors who could help support St. Jerome’s future.

Currie is effusive in his praise of Donoghue’s leadership through the whole process. “She has been able to completely go beyond” any expectations that the parish community could have had. As for herself, Donoghue says that “the swiftness with which this has come together” is evidence that “the Holy Spirit is guiding this process. My belief is that *this* is where Catholic education needs to move in the future, so that we don’t have any more generations of lost Catholics.”

The views expressed by the authors and editorial staff are not necessarily the views of Sophia Institute, Holy Spirit College, or the Thomas More College of Liberal Arts.

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