BLACKS EXCEL IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Bill Donohue

Catholic League members who received our February appeal will remember that I was not too happy when Ben & Jerry's, the ice cream company owned by two left-wing radicals, and Colin Kaepernick, the failed quarterback turned left-wing activist, teamed together to push an invidious message: "I Know My Rights."

The one thing young men and women do not need to learn these days—this includes whites as well as blacks—is more chatter about their rights. They are consumed with their rights. What would be refreshing is a lesson on their responsibilities, i.e., their duties to themselves and others. That's where Catholic schools have long excelled, especially with black students in the inner city.

Six black Catholics are formally candidates for sainthood. Here is a quick look at two of them and their ties to Catholic schools.

John Augustus Tolton was born a slave in Missouri in 1854. He was raised a Catholic by his mother, and despite his slave status, she instructed him, "John, boy, you're free. Never forget the goodness of the Lord."

Thanks to the intervention of an Irish priest, Fr. Peter McGirr, Tolton was allowed to attend St. Peter's Catholic School, an all-white parish school in Quincy, Illinois. The priest baptized him and prepared him for Holy Communion. Tolton felt the presence of God and wanted to become a priest. However, no seminary would have him because he was black. Fr. McGirr did not give up and arranged for Tolton to pursue the priesthood in Rome. After six years of study, he became a

priest in 1886, at the age of 31.

Tolton died in 1897 while on a retreat. He was America's first black Catholic priest, a man who overcame great odds and gave his life to the poor, the sick and the hungry. Known as "Good Father Gus," he is sure to become a saint.
Elizabeth Lange was born in Cuba, but she made her way to Baltimore in 1813. She used whatever resources she had to educate her fellow Caribbean immigrants, even while living as a black woman in a slave state. In 1828, Fr. James Hector Joubert asked her to start a school for girls of color; this was done at the behest of Archbishop James Whitfield.

Elizabeth knew she was called by God to serve the Catholic Church. She founded a religious order and was first superior of the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Sister Mary Lange, as she was called, founded St. Frances Academy in 1828 and was Principal and Superior of St. Benedict's School in Fells Point, an historic Baltimore neighborhood, in 1857. She also founded an orphanage and a widow's home.

While Fr. Tolton and Sister Mary Lange may be among the most prominent black Catholics to leave their mark on Catholic schools, there are many more like them, not as well known, who also made valuable contributions.

What made Catholic schools so special to black Americans in the 19th century was their evangelizing appeal. Missionaries to North America evangelized the Indians, but did not seek to convert black slaves. Free blacks were evangelized, the most common venue being Catholic schools. Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and New Orleans were home to many Catholic schools that served a black student body.

In 1866, right after the Civil War, bishops gathered in Baltimore for the Second Plenary Council. They forthrightly addressed the plight of former slaves, pledging to use Catholic schools as the conduit to evangelization. New

Catholic schools opened up during this period in Baltimore, Savannah, and St. Augustine.

In 1878, Father John Slattery, rector of St. Francis Xavier Church in Baltimore, argued that the only way to increase conversions among African Americans was through the black clergy. And the best way to do that, he said, was to expand the number of Catholic schools. While he had some success, he did not achieve as much as he had hoped. But things changed in the early part of the 20th century.

In 1914, Xavier Academy opened in New Orleans as a black Catholic school; Blessed Katherine Drexel was responsible for garnering financial support. In the early 1930s, the school became a college. The success of Xavier University was a double-edge sword: it simultaneously provided black Catholics with a first-class educational experience while also allowing other Catholic colleges and universities to continue with their segregated ways. Desegregation of Catholic institutions of higher education, like so many other American entities, did not take place until after World War II.

A surge of African American elementary and secondary students in Catholic schools—both in the North and the South—took place between 1930 and 1960. It was these low-cost schools, staffed mostly by nuns, that helped create a positive "Black Catholic identity"; they were home to a new evangelization.

Academic Excellence in Inner-City Catholic Schools

When I was honorably discharged from the U.S. Air Force in 1970, I had only one year of college under my belt. I stepped on the gas and two years later graduated from New York University. I then went to the New School for Social Research for my masters; I worked part-time as an athletic coach at an affluent Catholic school in New York City. When I only had a semester left before receiving my masters, I sought full-time employment.

I applied for jobs in accounting. That is what I was trained to do in the Air Force; I was computer literate. I was offered some good paying jobs but my heart wasn't in it. I did not want to be an accountant. Instead, I took a much lower paying job in a dangerous inner-city school, St. Lucy's in Spanish Harlem. I never regretted it. After getting my masters, I went back to NYU for my Ph.D. while working full-time at St. Lucy's. I later took a college teaching job in Pittsburgh, and received my Ph.D. in 1980.

I mention this because I saw first-hand the great good that Catholic schools do in poor minority neighborhoods. My students were Puerto Rican and African American. Their mothers (fathers were absent) sent their children to St. Lucy's for four reasons: safety, discipline, academic excellence and religious instruction. They were not disappointed.

It is hard for middle-class white people to identify with some of these conditions. But inner-city schools are typically in high-crime neighborhoods. I had my share of run-ins with dangerous men, as well as gangs.

The public school across the street was so engulfed in violence that the City of New York had to close it. Meanwhile, St. Lucy's students, who lived in the same neighborhood, did well.

Don't believe the nonsense about Catholic schools in the ghetto being more self-selective, choosing students who are less likely to be a problem in the classroom. When I worked at St. Lucy's just the opposite was true: recalcitrant public school students were often "dumped" on Catholic schools. We did our best with them, which was invariably better than what the public schools did with them.

When I took over in 1993 as president of the Catholic League, New York Archbishop John Cardinal O'Connor was making an offer to New York City. Send me your lowest-performing 5 percent of

students in the public schools, he said, and we'll put them in Catholic schools where they will succeed. City officials never responded.

We have known for decades that students from Catholic schools outclass their public school counterparts, and this is especially true of Catholic schools in the ghetto. In 1982, sociologist James Coleman and two other scholars published the results of their study comparing Catholic school students to those in the public schools: the former were one grade ahead of the latter in mathematics, reading and vocabulary. The biggest difference was between Catholic and public school students in the inner city.

What accounted for the gap? Catholic schools maintain a more rigorous academic curriculum and insist on discipline in the classroom. Another major factor was the administration of education. Catholic schools had many fewer administrators; the public schools were top heavy with bureaucratic norms.

Even the public school establishment knows how superior Catholic schools are. In 1993, the New York State Department of Education issued a report on academic achievement in the public schools and Catholic schools. The difference was huge: Catholic students way outperformed public school students.

Does religion play a role in the academic success of Catholic schools students? Yes, a study published in 1999 by William H. Jeynes of the University of Chicago found that "very religious black and Hispanic students outperformed less religious students in academic achievement." What makes this study so valuable is that it shows why charter public schools—which have learned a lot from Catholic schools—are still no substitute for Catholic schools, despite their success compared to traditional public schools.

In 2018, the National Center for Education Statistics released its 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress results

for reading and mathematics in grades four and eight. Catholic schools excelled, and not by a small degree: Catholic school students were much more proficient on every measure.

In 2018, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute published an important study showing the critical factor that school discipline plays in determining academic success.

Students in Catholic schools were less likely to be disruptive than those in other private schools or in public schools. They exhibited more self-control and were more likely to control their temper, respect others' property, accept their fellow students' ideas, and handle peer pressure. Self-discipline was a hallmark of Catholic schools. As with other studies, this one demonstrated the virtue of religious instruction in making for academic success.

Few things bother me more than hearing so-called progressives complain about racial inequality while steadfastly opposing school choice. No one who does not support charter schools and parochial schools as realistic options for minority students should be taken seriously as a champion of the poor.

Why don't we have school choice? Why does President Biden oppose it?

Sol Stern is a Jewish New Yorker who has done some of the best work on Catholic schools in the inner city. After examining all the reasons put forward by liberals why they oppose school choice, he concluded the number one reason was the power of the teachers' unions.

"It's hard to escape the conclusion that one of the most powerful reasons liberal opinion makers and policy makers ignore Catholic schools—and oppose government aid to them—is their alliance with the teachers' unions, which have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the campaign coffers of liberal candidates around the country."

Stern wrote this in 1996. Matters have only gotten worse. His observations are a sorry commentary on the subject of academic achievement among minority students.

Catholic schools have done so much good, especially among young men who routinely fail in the public schools. They learn about their responsibilities, not their “rights.” That is why they succeed, leaving the Ben & Jerry’s and Colin Kaepernick crowd behind.