
Building Moral Bridges

The Childhood Experiences of Women Who Attended Parochial Schools in the 1950s and 1960s and the Role of the Theory of Care Which Shaped Families and Communities

Melissa Brevetti
Langston University

Abstract

This qualitative study seeks to address how moral lessons were learned from childhood experiences that relate to the ethic of care, from the early influences within the family and parochial community. Using personal interviews and oral history narratives, the data collection shows striking connections between early experiences and lifetime decisions. The participants were adult women who had attended Catholic parochial schools in the United States during the time period of the 1950s and 1960s. The purpose of this oral history is to provide insight into the complexities of how women are encouraged into social leadership roles with others in their community. To explain more fully, the issue addressed here is how women were reared with a different emphasis on building relationships and fulfilling responsibilities in that women are often bound to societal expectations through the theoretical framework of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984), thus also shaping the culture to which they belong (Martin, 2002). Six of the seven women chose professional careers in education and communication, and they discussed the importance of community connections. The aim of this study is to illuminate how childhood moral experiences influenced women's decision-making in regard to family and community roles.

Keywords: ethic of care, moral education, women's roles, Catholic parochial schools, oral history

Introduction

Moral education has a long history that is a major means of socialization, whether the community is explicit or not in passing down principles. Parochial education emphasizes, in particular, many specific practices and curriculum in order to develop moral behaviors. However, it is what specifically shapes women to focus on these moral commitments across lifetimes that is questioned. Childhood moral experiences can be one of the most enlightening ways to gain insight into a person's intellectual and moral development. Most interestingly, some research indicates that highly moral people do not necessarily have superior levels of moral reasoning abilities.¹ Yet there is little evidence about the moral shaping and commitment of women who have received specific training in virtue-ethics.

During the time period of the 1950s and 1960s, nuns and priests who taught young women in Catholic education prioritized two key factors from the universal school text, called the *Baltimore Catechism*: first, the students memorized and understood the doctrine, which consisted of a study manual of questions and answers; and second, they were guided to live the tenets of faith in order to pass down the practices.² This nature of Catholic schooling was promoted by the community, as the parents and parish members fully supported the clergy to instruct and instill principles so that the youth preserved this moral training. Therefore, this research study shows the relationship between women's moral development that relates to the ethic of care from their parochial schooling and long-term sustainability of virtues.

Contextualizing the Inquiry and Purpose

Because I am specifically exploring the moral experiences of women who went to traditional Catholic schools, much of what is called the "tenets of faith" are directly referring to the religious instruction from the *Baltimore Catechism*. Developed and patterned after Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*,³ this student text also involved questions with memorized responses. Historian and philosopher of education, Neil Gerard McCluskey contended that "since the time of Archbishop Hughes in New York and the controversial 1840s, the Catholic position on education has remained substantially the same."⁴ Students are to study the sacraments, prayers, and principles. In sum, Catholic children learned from the *Baltimore Catechism* in schools from the time it was first produced in the 1840s until about 1970 as the primary resource to explain traditional beliefs and practices.

This oral history research is, I suggest, a poignant set of stories intended to gain cultural insight, rather than generalize, into the moral experiences of women who attended Catholic parochial schools during the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. Furthermore, as a qualitative research design, I will include the seven narrative summaries that show how the participants' lives which provide the context and connections. These backgrounds are critical stitches in the overall fabric to understand the collective, emergent themes. All of the life stories in this article illustrate a special linkage from their parents who advocated a Catholic education to the clergy who taught of moral consciousness in a didactic style to the participants' own deontological thinking and action as they created moral bridges between their childhood teachings and life experiences. The community adults viewed the parochial schools as a vehicle to transmit social and cultural beliefs to the next generation.

Historically, parochial schools emerged and flourished slowly but grew rapidly when millions of ambitious, albeit poor, immigrants established roots in the United States between 1820 and 1920. With an increasing Catholic immigrant population, by 1965, the Catholic parochial schools had reached an all-time high in enrollment, representing approximately 12% of American students at 5.6 million students.⁵ Therefore, many immigrants and second-generation immigrants wanted their own children to learn and to live moral lessons in a safe space while their ethnic practices were passed down, they stressed assimilation into mid-1900s American culture without losing their Roman Catholic faith in the process.⁶ Many community members of the Church saw this as a way to shape leaders of the future who would lead with principles—that is, memorized and practiced tenets from the *Baltimore Catechism* throughout their Catholic schooling—and would ultimately protect the praxis.

Most significantly, in contrast to male moral experiences, these storied interviews reveal experiences that put emphasis on the responsibilities, compromises, and opportunities that women were given at this point in time and place. A psychologist and innovator of moral-relationship research, Carol Gilligan critiqued the work of early moral development theories, which often used male subjects who adjusted rules and role-taking in order to resolve conflicts.⁷ She noticed that “rather than elaborating a system of rules for resolving disputes, girls subordinated the continuation of the game to the continuation of relationships.”⁸ Her work challenged earlier studies, in which women frequently identify and judge themselves through other relationships and their nurturing.⁹

Gilligan's research is not without critics.¹⁰ Yet her work demonstrates a clear intuitiveness about the situations and/or reasoning of women throughout history. Similarly, in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics*

and Moral Education, Nel Nodding extends this idea and thus develops the classic theory of care.¹¹ She explains that moral decisions are complex in a feminine way, because women “do give reasons for their acts, but the reasons often point to feelings, needs, impressions, and a sense of personal ideal rather than universal principles and their application.”¹² Therefore, drawing on Noddings’ thesis as a framework, this research study provides insight into the roles of women who were graduates of Catholic parochial schooling and their responsibilities toward family and community. That schooling traditionally served social and moral ends points us, as a result, to the way that this 1950s and 1960s parochial schooling holds a specific place in our culture, especially from women’s perspectives on moral shaping. As Jane Roland Martin aptly explains, “The making of cultures and the making of individuals go hand in hand. Cultures are composed of individuals. Thus, when schooling makes and shapes an individual, it is also making and shaping the culture to which that individual belongs.”¹³ In this carefully designed study, the primary source for this inquiry was the oral history interviews. The interviews were conducted by the researcher, using the lens of the theory of care for analysis and interpretation. The purpose of this study is to understand how adult women perceive their moral experiences in Catholic parochial schooling during this time period, and how these situations—often involving social conflicts and introspective resolutions—shaped participants’ lives.

Oral History Research as Methodology: Women Participants’ Stories Shed Light on Moral Life Lessons

This section expounds oral history research as methodology by gathering participants’ narratives as the data collection in order to most effectively elicit honest information and to share storied experiences. Seven interviewees (pseudonyms given) were contacted through the snowball method of connecting other participants who meet the eligibility criteria and met a few times for clarifications after the initial meeting with the signed consent form that was developed from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. This sample was purposefully chosen since the depth of responses would explain how participants themselves connected their moral life lessons to earlier Catholic tenets, whether they evolved, confirmed, or disagreed with those Baltimore Catechism principles. They were asked questions from an interview guide, which prompted them to explore their lives, in terms of family background, education, and profession, in addition to their most significant moral experiences in school. Past memories are the foundation of oral history

investigations so that, moreover, these living testimonies are viewed, aggregated, and interpreted as data.

After in-depth interviews, participants read the transcripts and met again for follow-up clarifications. To explain their moral reasoning and action more fully, I asked these participants to highlight, in particular, their most influential moral experiences from their Catholic school years, albeit the interview content included various aspects of their lives from childhood to older adulthood years. Participants appeared excited and candid when they recalled their memories. In order to put together the biographical information and emergent themes, this study relied on memories of the past, and the researcher paid special attention to capture the emotions for deep meanings, giving “voice” to the participants. Interestingly, six of the seven women chose careers in education, feeling fulfilled by balancing their work, community service, and family. In this article, the biographical summaries provide the essential context in order to understand the participants’ moral commitment. Below are the brief summaries of all the participants, who shared significant parts of their lives.

Catherine

Catherine went to a small, coed Catholic school, which included grades first through eighth, near New Haven, Connecticut. Her parents worked in a factory, and they “sacrificed” to provide their four children with a religious education. After graduating from junior high, Catherine then attended the local public high school where her two older siblings had attended. She continued her education at a small Catholic university to earn an Associate’s degree in business.

Sisters of Mercy taught at her elementary school. Most the nuns were traditional and “older,” yet Catherine mentioned one lay teacher in the school, who taught science at their school and was “fun.” She also remembered a younger nun who took them bowling and other outside activities, which was exciting for the students to see a nun acting like a “normal person.” Some memories that she recalled revealed youthful shyness and trepidation of a nun hitting her with a ruler. Regularly, she and her younger brother would walk about a mile to the school; sometimes, they walked back to school on the weekends, too, so that they could participate in recreational activities that the nuns offered for the students. The nuns encouraged a love of reading, and she became the yearbook editor during her high school years.

Later, Catherine moved away from the East Coast and continued her schooling with degrees in education while she was a stay-at-home

mother for several years. She and her husband met on a blind date, and they have three children. Because her content area was in early childhood education, she taught grades pre-kindergarten and first grade for approximately fifteen years before she retired. Now, with more free time, she enjoys volunteering for Eucharistic Adoration at her church, preparing meals for ailing church members, and spending time with her grandchildren.

Bridget

Bridgette attended a small Catholic elementary in Oklahoma City and then attended one of the largest coed Catholic high schools in the state. Her parents were both raised Catholic and went to daily Mass together. For many generations that she can recall, her family practiced Catholicism, even sharing a family story of that the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on her great-grandfather's front yard. As the middle child, she has a younger and older sister. Her older sister got pregnant at nineteen, and Bridget felt pressure from her parents to excel in her studies.

Dominican Nuns, frequently described as "strict," instructed at her elementary school where the school had only one lay person. Various religious orders taught at the large Catholic high school: Carmelite Sister, Precious Blood Sisters, Providence Sisters, Sisters of Mercy, and Benedictines. She loved high school, participating in the pep squad and working on the yearbook. In fact, she was chosen as the yearbook editor, and those experiences inspired her that "she could do anything that she wanted." The ultimate message from her schooling was "service." For example, her class organized boycotts to promote desegregation in the community. Activism was encouraged as part of their lives.

After high school, Bridgette began a career in education. She also worked as a director of religious education and youth counselor for many years, speaking at conferences and providing workshops. She earned a Master's degree in Human Relations. Her Catholic school was where she met her husband, and at twenty-one she married her high-school sweetheart and had five daughters. Currently, she is raising her three granddaughters due to family circumstances with substance abuse.

Ava

Ava grew up in Sea Cliff, New York, where she went to a Catholic elementary school. Immigrating from Germany, her parents were trying to achieve good lives for their two daughters, as they were "highly motivated" to find their place in the United States. Her parents had been childhood sweethearts. Since her father had worked as an engineer in

Germany, he was trying to continue his work after moving; however, he was forced to shovel coal, working fourteen or more hours a day, until he mastered the English language and return to his engineering expertise. Both parents were raised Catholic, and they were determined to provide a Catholic education for their children as well.

In Ava's school, Sisters of Mercy taught. One unique feature of the school was that it was located in a harbor town where the patrol torpedo boats of the U.S. Navy conducted tests. Like many schools of the time, the local Catholic school had no kindergarten classes. Therefore, Ava's parents went ahead and placed her in the first grade, albeit she was young for the grade. She recalled traveling by bus for first to eighth grades and enjoyed going to school since the nuns encouraged the students with approaches that "were way ahead." After parochial school graduation, she went to a public high school and was chosen as the head baton twirler of the school. She expressed, "I did things differently," stating her confidence came from her rigorous parochial education.

After attending the large public high school in the community, Ava went to college and earned an English degree. Family is important to her. She mentioned that her sister was an alcoholic, and she took on the role as the caretaker of the family. Her husband converted to Catholicism, and they have children who are also active Catholics. She asserted, "When I got married, women were to be passive..." For that reason, she warned her husband that she liked to speak her mind, which he responded that he did not want to change her and "valued her judgements." After retiring from teaching, she acts as a church leader for Communion Ministers and volunteers with Mobile Meals. She mentions a life of "service" was expected.

Laura

In the St. Louis area, Laura went to a small Catholic parochial school. She attended the large public high school, which she described as, "It was an expense thing." During her high school years, she disliked the school: it had over one thousand students in each class. In fact, she had stayed in touch with her Catholic childhood friends, and through one of those parochial school friendships, she met her husband. They have been married for over forty years after meeting while he was in seminary studies.

As mentioned previously, she attended a Roman Catholic elementary school while her family lived in a metropolitan area. Sisters of Loretta instructed students; they had two classes for every grade. The class sizes were about fifty students per grade. Laura remembered the teaching staff

as mostly nuns who taught in formal and full black habits, in addition to four priests who provided religious instruction and school Masses. One seminary was approximately a mile away, so the seminarians visited at least once a week to teach religious classes to the students.

Laura worked as a substitute teacher, and her husband started a steel fabrication business. Then she was a stay-at-home mother and liked being at home with her son and daughter. Her fun personality is apparent to all whom know her; she has been voted “Woman of the Year” for many different services to her parish community. As she sees it, “You just treat people the way that you want to be treated.” Many of her stories showed irony that community members were overly formal. Laura voiced that people have one God, and we can celebrate Him in many diverse ways. Her wish is for her children to practice a faith since they do not participate in any type of belief system.

Madeline

Raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Madeline went to a small Catholic elementary and high school. She and her three brothers went to parochial schools, and she laughs that her mother practically ran the school. Her mom was very “strict” and would go by the school often to make sure that all her children were behaving. In fact, she would tell the nuns how to run the school, pushing high expectations and working together with the nuns.

In Madeline’s schools, Dominican nuns taught the curriculum. Frequently, the nuns and priests offered evening activities so that the students had a safe place to socialize. Everything was “hands-on.” These opportunities allowed her and her brothers the freedom to walk back in the evenings. Adults would attend the meetings while the children would play basketball or billiards while the adults had meetings. Madeline voiced the nuns were “devoted” as their students were a direct reflection of their education, in addition to the nuns seeing the children as their own.

After graduation, Madeline continued her education and obtained a foreign language degree, eventually finding an opportunity with a company that does engineering and environmental services. While she was working at age twenty-two, she met her husband. He has “no religion” but agreed to raise the children in the Catholic faith. Interestingly, all her children and grandchildren are practicing Catholics, and her grandchildren attend Catholic schools since she finds the teaching methods as more advanced than the public education. Madeline has served as the director of the Mary and Martha Kitchen Stewardship for people in need of meals for various reasons. Furthermore, she pays Catholic

school tuition for her grandchildren, because she credits the parochial school structure as a way to acquire a life of service.

Celine

Celine attended a Catholic elementary school in the Oklahoma City area. Despite being too young for first grade, her parents sent her since her older brother was only one grade above. Her parents were active Catholics and sent all six of their children to Catholic schools—the family was poor but Catholic education, nonetheless, was essential. As a butcher, her father worked long hours to support the family.

Sisters of Mercy from Leavenworth, Kansas, were sent to teach at her Catholic school. These nuns pushed rigor, often assigning a couple prayers every week for memorization. These religious memorizations were checked for mastery—tests. Celine recalled that she “hated” the religion classes and did not enjoy memorizing the Baltimore Catechism and prayers. What she most enjoyed were the traditional songs. In young adulthood, she mentioned and reflected how she did not practice her faith. However, she began to cling to these practices “learned as a child” through hardships.

After obtaining a Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.), she worked as a professor at a public university for a decade where she instructed trade and industrial education courses. She married a man who also worked as a professor. Later, in her retirement years, she has taught many different classes of Adult Studies in Religion for her church communities. Celine articulated much gratitude for her moral education by declaring her parents could not have taken the time, nor had the knowledge, to explain the theology that the nuns passed down to their students.

Emma

In Fort Smith, Arkansas, Emma attended all thirteen years, K-12, in Catholic schools. Her father was Catholic, and her mother decided to convert. They had four children who attended Catholic schools, because they wanted the community support. Indeed, her parents expressed that an “extra layer” of respect was important with the nuns as educators.

Sisters of Mercy ran her small Catholic schools with rigorous attention. Emma asserted that she “loved school.” Many activities were available for the students; she especially enjoyed Girl Scouts. In addition, she evoked a special memory when one nun told her that she had strong leadership skills, which inspired her to be in leadership and mentoring roles. Being involved in the community was important to her. Some specific high school activities included: Yearbook Editor, National

Honor Society, and President of the Pep Squad. It was known that her parents sacrificed to provide their children with a Catholic education.

Emma's life has centered around her faith in multiple ways. Her husband is an active deacon; they raised their four children in Catholic elementary and junior high schools. For many years, she was a Catholic schoolteacher, as well as later a substitute teacher in public schools. Since the closest Catholic high school was over forty-five minutes away, they decided their children would attend public high schools and experience more diversity. Providing service to the Catholic community, she and her husband have acted as the presidential team of the Catholic School Board for several years. In addition to her school leadership service, she instructs sacrament classes at her parish.

Results: Emergent Themes Related to Care

The women participants divulged key components of their lives that, whether they directly recognized it or not, emphasized their relationships and responsibilities to the community. In order to be an emergent theme, five of seven (5 of 7) participants must have mentioned that particular commonality. These reflections on relationships and responsibilities showed three emergent themes: providing service to the community, preferring peaceful circumstances, and exploring opportunities for moral action. First, it should be pointed out that these participants discussed giving back in multiple ways, such as volunteering to teach moral education classes and bringing food to those in need. These stories revealed various ways that these women wanted to nurture their local community. Second, accounts of conflict indicated how the women often took on the role of a peaceful negotiator so that everyone moved forward with minimal disruptions, even though they recognized human errors in the teaching authorities. When it came to these frustrations, the women focused on solutions to keep peace. Third, women appreciated the opportunities, especially from their parents and nuns, that gave them the knowledge to think about moral matters. Years later, participants quoted from the Baltimore Catechism and viewed the ideals as still important in their lives that, moreover, the textbook's principles—connected with their experiences and independent thinking—guided their moral choices.

From the cumulative essence of these stories, the clergy encouraged and praised the female students when they acted in collaborative roles. Many participants were active with the yearbook team, Girl Scouts, and pep squad, even though formal sports teams were not mentioned once. Traditionally, the Catholic parochial schools' curriculum were viewed as rigorous and advanced for career preparation or university stud-

ies—and yet, female students were expected to get married after high school/college and choose a professional field that would have flexibility to start a family. All the participants were married within the Church and signed papers to raise their children with a Catholic upbringing. By having children, this ensured further involvement in the school and parish community.

Providing Hands-On Service to the Community

Altruism was a common trait of the stories from the women participants, and they explicitly viewed their service roles in the community as key to their identities. Several mentioned their mothers leading in volunteer activities, such examples include making costumes for all the children when they had school plays or delivering mail at the local hospital to sick patients for decades. Many families in their Catholic communities, who struggled and sacrificed to send their children to parochial schools, were poor with little resources. However, neighbors trusted and shared their time and belongings with each other. Having these community experiences and modeled behaviors shaped the women's future choices of how they would actively participate in their communities.

The women participants mentioned multiple areas of current volunteerism: Crisis Pregnancy Centers, Religious Education Teachers, Mobile Meals, Spiritual Workshops and Seminars, Adoration Prayer Hours, Global Unbound Sponsorships for People in Poverty, Meal Preparations, and Communion Ministry. Most interestingly, the women took on specific areas that included a component of hands-on care—in other words, this study revealed women volunteer for services that connects people.

To explain one example more fully, the Global Unbound Sponsorship involves a monthly contribution to a child or elderly person in a third-world country with the opportunity to write letters back and forth, as well as pray for the well-being of that person. One participant, Celine, has supported her sponsee for over ten years, and she is now helping to provide books and materials as the sponsee attends college. Since she was a college professor, she feels fulfillment in supporting her sponsee in India to earn a higher education. To provide another instance of care, several women who participate in the Martha and Mary Kitchen Stewardship choose menu items and cook a meal that will usually be bought by them to the community member in need. This also fits with Nodding's theoretical framework of care: their acts of service are relational.

One of the most significant aspects of these women who were parochial school graduates, and the community roles in which they have chosen, was the fact that not one of the service roles included finances

or engineering components. With countless volunteer areas in a parish community, it was surprising that none of the women served on economical or building committees. Indeed, all seven participants spent lives in various forms of service education, too, including summer religious education classes, substitute teaching, and spiritual counseling. Bridgette aptly explained, "Old classmates of mine have discussed how at St. Pope John Paul II [high school name has been changed] we got the clear message of service... That we are here to help other, not just accumulate wealth." All participants cited that this message of acting for positive change and leadership was rooted in their Catholic education. Laura explained, "Something about your moral makeup comes through. It [Catholicism] is a way of life. You just treat people the way that you want to be treated." Most interestingly, service as part of their Catholic upbringing was voiced as an important piece of their daily adult lives.

Seeking Peace at their Own Expense

Participants shared stories how they had questions and/or conflicts, and they often found introspective resolutions when the teaching clergy did not act in fair ways. To be sure, clergy and students had interactions, in which moral lessons were learned, but, most interestingly, the mistakes of the clergy showed the participants that harmony and sacrifice were important pieces to a well-functioning society. Queries were not especially encouraged; it took courage to be true to themselves and not provoke further disagreement on a topic. Due to the lack of encouragement on controversial topics, the women had to find strength within themselves to discover and internalize their own independent beliefs.

One story that illustrates this emergent theme, preferring peaceful situations, features how Emma was put in a difficult position, and she decided to keep a secret for the good of her class. One of her nuns decided to let her class evaluate her teaching. Instead of using the critiques as a professional development tool, the nun got her feelings hurt from the students' comments. Emma pointed out that the middle-school girls were "ruthless" when they were given the opportunity to make judgements. Unfortunately, the nun got her "feelings hurt" so badly, that she declared there would be no more class assignments. This plan backfired with the students because they were "thrilled to have not assignments." The nun had lost total control of the class. She ended up seeking out Emma since she was one of the well-liked leaders of the class and pleaded to have her ask for assignments. Emma recognized that the nun had behaved inappropriately; however, she discerned that it was in everyone's best interest for her to pretend it was her idea to ask for homework, to claim that

they should be learning. The nun knew she was wrong, too, as she swore Emma to keep their conversation a secret. At the time, Emma thought about the situation and knew it was the best approach for the class, as well as forgave the nun's poor decision-making. Emma kept her promise to the nun in order to bring back a peaceful learning environment.¹⁵

Another story shows that Celine had questions about what content was morally appropriate. She had stated watching the television show "Johnny Belinda," a drama that was based on a real-life story of a girl who was raped and became pregnant. During a retreat, she mustered up the courage to ask the priest if it was wrong to watch the show. Her question was considered "brazen" and the priest's reaction showed he felt the shows would stimulate "sexual feelings."¹⁶ Even though a judgmental attitude was demonstrated by the priest, Celine learned empowerment to ask questions and trust herself to make decisions.

When it comes to seeking peaceful circumstances as a commonality of women's roles, two factors—patience and responsibility—played a developmental role in these moral experiences. The women frequently remained quiet, appearing tolerant in many stories but reflecting deeply on a more personal level, in order to act responsibly for the common good. The childhood moral experiences showed human errors in the social interactions, which is intriguing since dialogue is often critical to the care model. Nonetheless, the participants learned moral lessons through independent reasoning, despite the lack of dialogue and subsequent frustrations. They had questions, of course, and relied on their own thinking about fairness and justice as stated in the *Baltimore Catechism* so that they kept situations from escalating. The women in this study regard themselves to be "good Catholics" as a key part of their adult identity and found empowerment by striving for peaceful solutions, showing that actions can reveal virtue more than spoken words.

Appreciating the Opportunities for Moral Thought and Action

All seven of the participants explicitly appreciated the time and money that was put into their education. They expressed deep gratitude to their parents and clergy who encouraged them to recognize their own strength and potential. Many of the women explained how the nuns would tell their students that their pupils were a reflection of them, and several participants emotionally described these teachers as "devoted." Yes, they were considered stern but devoted to the students. Moreover, the nuns instructed without pay, offering opportunities for the students to learn life skills from them with after-school activities and on the weekends. As adults, the participants also evaluated their parents did not have

the moral knowledge of the clergy who taught—it was a privilege to be taught by leaders of the Church. Students attended Catholic Mass every day, in addition to studying the *Baltimore Catechism* in religion classes each day for their studies.

Catherine appreciated the opportunities to learn from the nuns. She explained how she also loved spending time with the nuns on the weekends. In particular, she recalled how one nun took the time to teach her how to make meatballs, because she wanted the students to know how to care and cook for their families. One interesting advantage of her parochial education that Catherine explained was the “family and school were linked.” Indeed, paying for the four children to have a Catholic education was a “hard sacrifice” but living moral principles of the Church was demonstrated by her parents, who were both factory workers. Learning from the clergy was greatly valued and not forgotten. Her mother is now eighty-eight years old and still remembers the exact cost of the parochial school tuition.¹⁷ Female students were encouraged to be in the free school activities of the time: Girl Scouts, Yearbook Committees, and Pep Clubs. In this research study, it was mentioned by all the participants that money was tight for the families as they saved for what they viewed as an advanced education that provided opportunities for the children to deeply study the core subjects of life, which included religion.

Another interesting story shows how Emma’s clergy teachers created a “forum” where the students could discuss common issues. This gave the space to discuss any topic, and the students were allowed “however long it could take” in order to examine and understand current event news. The students were involved and appreciated this opportunity. Emma mentioned that she would love to be in a career of politics. However, the priest told her that politics were a “dirty business.” She described how the priest believed she would be disappointed and warning her from that type of life. Interestingly, Emma considered his caveat as “protective advice.”¹⁸ She became an elementary school teacher, deciding to later serve on the Catholic School Board and president of the Parent Teacher’s Association (PTA) for her children.

Although participants mentioned the prayers and memorizations to be “boring” at the time, they appreciated the opportunity to memorize the prayers, principles, and teachings as adults. The information from the *Baltimore Catechism* became a moral guide for their life decisions. While in school, the priests would make surprise visits to the classrooms to check on the students, asking questions from the *Baltimore Catechism* learning curriculum to see if students knew the proper responses. Despite sometimes less than virtuous behavior of the priests and nuns, the participants recognized and respected the ideals in their religious stud-

ies. They also realized the rigidity of the instruction did not support compassionate understanding and flexibility, as they sought autonomy in how they would use the principles. Moreover, this autonomy in how to apply the tenets of faith has led to a more accepting and less rigid Catholic Church. In sum, the experiences of studying moral thought and action opened young minds to think critically how to apply the Church doctrine in their daily lives.

Discussion: Understanding the Past to Move Forward

Historically, the Catholic education of the 1950s and 1960s was viewed as rigorous and virtue-oriented. As noted earlier, the clergy had the ultimate goal to pass down the beliefs and practices to the next generation, in which the schooling provided a feminine approach as most the teachers were nuns. Traditional Catholic hierarchy, in what may be viewed with controversy, indicated community leadership as a predominately male experience, illustrated by male popes, bishops, priests, deacons, and even altar boys. But this time in history—with multiple, small parochial schools and tight-knit communities—allowed young girls to seek and to embrace leadership roles, too.

Despite the missteps of the teaching clergy at times, these women who were former parochial school graduates picked up fundamental components of care: providing hands-on service to the community and striving for the common good. All the participants shared their stories and voiced their early Catholic experiences led them to grow in these active and social roles. As Noddings evaluated, “The model of moral education developed through care ethics is process oriented. It involves modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation.”¹⁹ One participant explained this process approach as “I really think the moral issues were more drilled by the moral example of the teachers [emphasis added].” The stories such as those above revealed that multiple members of the community took responsibility for the learning of the child—hence, the process was multi-faceted with many people and pieces. The clergy made human errors, and the participants recognized these frustrations, learning that people are fallible; nonetheless, justice is a worthy goal.

How do present-day educators develop and provide a care ethic for students? It comes full circle back to devoted teachers with appropriate rigor—in this oral history inquiry, these participants respected their teacher-nuns and later appreciated the arduous studying of the *Baltimore Catechism*. Furthermore, from this research study, the women expressed sincere gratitude for the choice of their parents to send them to an “advanced” parochial school, where they also felt “trust” in the

nuns who cared for them. The participants recognized that they had a didactic education but, moreover, were given the tools to construct a moral bridge in their mind so that they connected the strict tenets of faith to their real, personal experiences. Put simply, this study of women's moral experiences indicates an additional pattern that reveals women felt empowered and fulfilled as moral leaders in their communities. Their teachers and community encouraged them to have leadership roles, such as head editors of the yearbook and captains of the squad, to name a few examples. This last comment suggests an answer through understanding the past, an answer to the difficult question of how to provide a present-day ethic of care—that is, modeling positive behaviors, allowing the space to study virtue, and developing habits of altruism are essential traits *from* the community so that young people learn moral responsibility. By supporting the parochial students to engage in educative opportunities before, during, and after their schooltime with guidance from a trusted mentor, whether that came from a parent/family member or leader in the community, young people ultimately felt that they gained the lifelong tools in order to build moral bridges between their school teachings and life experiences.

Notes

¹ Anne Colby and William Damon, *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1992); Daniel Hart and Suzanne Fegley, "Prosocial behavior and caring in adolescence: Relations to self-understanding and social judgment," *Child Development* 66 (Oct 1995): 1346-1359.

² Thomas Kinkead, *An Explanation of the Baltimore Catechism* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1891).

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by English Dominican Fathers, trans. 3 vols. New York, NY: Benziger, 1947-1948; reprint ed., Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981.

⁴ Neil Gerard McCluskey, *Catholic Viewpoint on Education* (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1959), 167.

⁵ Thomas C. Hunt, "Catholic Schools: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 14, no. 2 (2005): 166.

⁶ Anthony E. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 27.

⁷ Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1966); Lawrence Kohlberg, "Moral Education for a Society in Moral Transition," *Educational Leadership* 33, no. 1 (1975): 46-54.

⁸ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 10.

⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁰ Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young People* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Naomi

Weisstein, "Power, Resistance, and Science: A Call for a Revitalized Feminist Psychology," *Feminism & Psychology* 3, no. 2 (1993): 239-245.

¹¹ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ Jane Roland Martin, *Cultural Miseducation: In Search of a Democratic Solution* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2002), 91.

¹⁴ Bridgette Interview.

¹⁵ Emma Interview.

¹⁶ Celine Interview.

¹⁷ Catherine Interview.

¹⁸ Emma Interview.

¹⁹ Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (New York, NY: Teacher's College Press, 2000).