

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



(Pexels/RODNE Stock project)

Charles C. Camosy

[View Author Profile](#)

Karen Celano

[View Author Profile](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

July 9, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

America's Catholic seminaries, like many belonging to other Christian denominations across the country, are in trouble. Beset by enrollment, financial and other challenges, Catholic seminaries are also facing problems intimately linked to the crises in the American church more broadly.

Young Catholics, who have historically formed the student bodies of these schools, are abandoning their faith, and the church appears unable to articulate a compelling moral, theological and pastoral vision in response. Though a few archdioceses have recently [bucked the trend](#), vocations to the priesthood and religious life have been in substantial decline for decades.

The crisis in Catholic seminaries has impacted Catholic parish and diocesan schools, many of which have closed in recent years due to the same practical and existential problems. Pastors and priests are too few, overstretched, and have too little formation in school administration or in the church's theology of education. They are often run by lay Catholics who also lack sufficient formation in the Catholic vision for education.

As a result, many schools struggle to provide an integrated vision of Catholic life to their students, leaving students unable to articulate why their faith matters or how it addresses the moral questions of our time.

[Related:](#) [What makes education Catholic? This book is glad you asked](#)

Some faithful laypeople have begun an effort to renew Catholic schools. Rooted in church teaching and seeing the faith as permeating all aspects of human life and learning, these new projects include independent schools such as the [Chesterton Academies](#), homeschooling initiatives such as [Regina Caeli](#), and the transformation of existing parochial schools, such as at [St. Jerome](#) in Washington, D.C. Other organizations, such as the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, are supporting these efforts, proposing to "[reclaim the Church's classical tradition of liberal education](#)."

The rapid growth of these efforts is evidence of a deep desire U.S. Catholics have to preserve their faith, live it out and pass it on to their children.

In recent years, Catholic institutions of higher education have taken note of these efforts and sought to capitalize on them with professional development programs for educators at places such as the [Catholic University of America](#), the [University of Dallas](#) and the [Augustine Institute](#).

But more is needed to support this explosion of creativity in Catholic education. Catholic seminaries should step forward to reenvision their role in the life of the church. Speaking as a seminary professor and as a Catholic school educator, we believe that seminaries are uniquely well-positioned to support Catholic schools and that such a pivot would benefit both Catholic schools and seminaries, and therefore the American church as a whole.

Advertisement

In this vision of renewed purpose for seminaries, they would open their doors to a broader audience of Catholic teachers and education thinkers, offering theology, pastoral studies and spiritual direction. Seminaries could also provide professional development for teachers and faith formation programs. They could curate retreats, pilgrimages, service opportunities and other spiritual formation events that specifically serve the needs of Catholic school students and their families.

Lay teachers and administrators, especially those involved in the revival movement of new Catholic schools, could benefit from the seminaries' expertise in sound theological anthropology and church history, as well as the pastoral and spiritual wisdom collected in these institutions.

Seminaries could strengthen their bonds with Catholic schools, meanwhile, by assigning seminarians to teach religion and other courses, perhaps in cost-effective partnerships that would improve the schools' bottom lines. Seminaries could also open some courses to high school students to provide dual-enrollment opportunities. Forging such ties may encourage these students to consider vocations to priesthood or religious life and plant the seeds of service to the church in their formative years.

For seminarians, courses could be offered not only in school administration but also in the church's theology of education, helping them become better equipped to lead

Catholic schools as priests and pastors. Partnerships could be established with diocesan school offices or with lay professional organizations such as the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education.

Contact with school communities would also give seminarians essential pastoral experience, not just in administering and leading a school, but how best to serve the needs of Catholic families and young people. It is critically important for priests in formation to know what laypeople (and especially young people) are looking for from their church. Engagement with Catholic schools can help seminarians enter ministry with a clearer sense of the pastoral needs of their flock.

[Related: Five ways Hispanic educators are breathing new life in Catholic schools](#)

By supporting Catholic schools and training Catholic educators, seminaries would gain much-needed sources of revenue, not to mention potential future seminarians and, eventually, priests to serve the needs of the seminary and the church as a whole.

This kind of cooperation would help relieve the alienation of independent Catholic schools, as well. In these institutions, there can be a tendency for the school to serve the needs of its own community, detached from parish life. They often lose sight of an evangelical role within the broader church as a whole.

Partnership with local seminaries could keep all Catholic schools healthily connected to the broader structures of the church.

Above the financial and structural benefits, a partnership between seminaries and Catholic schools would offer spiritual benefits for Catholic families and youth, who will gain a sense of connection to the institutional church and an assurance that the church does, indeed, care about their needs and formation.

Changing the role of seminaries in the life of the church will require creative thinking and bold leadership to meet this moment. But with the future of seminaries in question, we think such partnerships will give these critical institutions an invaluable opportunity to renew their own mission in service to the church and to the world.