

MOTHER TERESA AS A CHARTER SCHOOL

I asked my authority on Catholic affairs about a possible parallel between public education and the church. It was pretty interesting.

Every square foot of the earth is in some territorial subdivision of the Catholic Church. Parishes and their churches are part of a diocese which is part of an archdiocese and so on. The archbishop is a leader in his territory but the bishops have a great deal of authority and independence, as do the priests who work in the individual churches. It is pretty much like the governor/commissioner of education, the superintendents in the districts, and the principals/teachers in the schools.

There are also the orders – organizations with no geographic base, formed by some individual with a special sense of mission who secures a special edict (charter) from the Pope. The best-known recent example is Mother Teresa, whose Missionaries of Charity in recent years was the fastest-growing order in the Church. The orders do some things the hierarchy don't always do (such as run hospitals and colleges) but also do the things the dioceses do: run churches and carry on the ministry. It can, in fact, get quite competitive, especially (in recent years) with the breaking-down of the tradition that a Catholic family attends the church of its local parish. Parish churches today are increasingly competitive with each other and with churches run by the orders. Open enrollment, yea.

Strictly speaking, an order must get the OK from the local bishop to set up a church in a diocese. And, in theory, a bishop could ask an order to leave. So the parallel with education breaks down here. A charter school, we've thought, should be able to set up in a district without having to get the permission of the local superintendent.

But the reason for the difference is important. In the Church the archbishop appoints the bishops. It may take a period of years, but a failing diocese can be corrected in this way. The governor or commissioner of education cannot, however, appoint the superintendents. The superintendents are appointed out of a process inside the local diocese/district, which is effectively independent of higher authority.

So the state must find some other way to correct a failing district. Open enrollment is that device. It will work if the districts are trying hard enough for excellence. It won't if they aren't. If they aren't, then the state will need to give some new 'order' permission to come into the territory to carry out its mission... will need to charter the education equivalent of a Mother Teresa... whether the local bishops like it or not.