

Doctrina, Fides, Gubernatio: Messmer High School from 1926-2001

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DOCTRINA, FIDES, GUBERNATIO: MESSMER HIGH SCHOOL
FROM 1926-2001

by

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ABSTRACT
DOCTRINA, FIDES, GUBERNATIO: MESSMER HIGH SCHOOL
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Marquette University, 2010

In 1926, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee opened its first Diocesan high school, hoping thereby to provide Milwaukee's north side with its own Catholic school. By 1984 the Archdiocese claimed that the combination of declining enrollment and rising operating costs left it no option other than permanently closing Messmer. In response, a small group of parents and community members aided by private philanthropy managed to reopen the school shortly thereafter as an independent Catholic school. This reemergence suggested a compelling portrait of the meaning given to a school, even as ethnic, religious, and racial boundaries shifted.

Modern studies tend to regard Catholic schools as academically outstanding and socially just institutions. In particular, Bryk, Holland and Lee's *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* celebrates community and a belief in the importance of a Catholic education. They present extensive statistical evidence demonstrating the overall effectiveness of these schools and identify the three most significant features of Catholic schools - the emphasis on a rigorous academic curriculum for all students, an environment filled with caring, committed school personnel and parental support, and a strong identification with principles of social justice. Seemingly consistent with this view over time were Messmer's college-preparatory curriculum despite limited budgets, religious and lay instructors who felt strongly about both Catholic education and Christian values, and an expressed commitment to social justice that shifted with Vatican II directives from global politics to local concerns, especially in relation to neighborhood integration and community diversity. While Bryk, Holland, and Lee's assertions may be correct, it is important to examine these beliefs, and Messmer provides ample opportunity to study the widely held assumptions about a Catholic school. Therefore, this dissertation examines a seventy-five year period at Messmer High School to explore the extent to which it was able to meet these modern ideals.

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Rebecca A. Lorentz, B.A., M.A.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

In 1926, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee opened its first Diocesan high school, hoping thereby to provide Milwaukee's north side with its own Catholic school. Later renamed Messmer High School after Sebastian Messmer, the archbishop who called for its creation, it thrived in its early years and enrollment peaked after World War II, forcing the school to operate in shifts to accommodate students enrolled at double the school's capacity. This prosperity did not last. As the city changed, so did the school. By 1984, the Archdiocese claimed that the combination of declining enrollment and rising operating costs left it no option other than permanently closing Messmer. In response, a coalition of parents, community members, and private philanthropy managed to reopen the school shortly thereafter as an independent Catholic school. This reemergence suggested a compelling portrait of the meaning a community gave to its school, even as ethnic, religious, and racial boundaries shifted.

My first year as an English teacher at Messmer was in 1998. By this time, Messmer had regained state and national attention in part because of its participation in Milwaukee's controversial school choice program. My previous teaching experience had been in a public school in Atlanta, and I was fascinated by the way students who were infants at the time of the closing and faculty who were new to the school celebrated "the Messmer Community." Everyone seemed to take ownership of and pride in the fact that the school reopened and remained viable after Archbishop Weakland had determined it could not survive.

Contemporary studies tend to regard Catholic schools as academically outstanding and socially just institutions. For example, Bryk, Holland and Lee's *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* celebrates a school-centered community and a belief in the importance of a Catholic education. They present extensive statistical evidence demonstrating the overall effectiveness of these schools and identify three significant features of Catholic schools - an emphasis on a rigorous academic curriculum for all students, a school community filled with caring, committed school personnel and parental support, and a strong identification with principles of social justice.¹ Seemingly consistent with this view were Messmer's college-preparatory curriculum despite limited budgets, religious and lay instructors who felt strongly about both Catholic education and Christian values, and an expressed commitment to social justice that shifted with Vatican II directives from global politics to local concerns, especially in relation to neighborhood integration and community diversity. However, Messmer High School can be viewed as at least two different schools, both in terms of its Archdiocesan affiliation and its educational philosophy. The school's unprecedented reopening resulted from a small but vocal coalition that managed to gain substantial financial support. This pairing reached beyond existing community and religious boundaries and suggests another look at community involvement and social justice as they relate to a single school. While Bryk, Holland, and Lee's assertions may be correct, it is important to examine these beliefs, and Messmer provides an opportunity to study the widely held assumptions about a Catholic school and any data which can be used to support those assumptions. Testing these assumptions as they relate to Messmer is especially important as the school is often used

¹Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee and Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10.

to demonstrate the effectiveness of a school voucher program. Here, Messmer High School is examined over time to see the extent to which it offered an academic curriculum, provided a caring and nurturing school community, and identified with principles of social justice.

The term “Catholic education” is often used interchangeably to refer to programs of instruction offered by individual parish schools, diocesan schools, colleges and universities, and programs of religious instruction provided by churches. Beyond this, there is a wide range in philosophies of education, whether it is from religious teaching orders (especially the Jesuits and Franciscans), Church hierarchy, or the parents and their students who attend individual schools. In Milwaukee, the various religious, ethnic, educational, and geographical communities surrounding Messmer changed significantly from the school’s 1926 origin, its vitality in the 1960’s, its 1984 closing and reopening, and its current place in Milwaukee’s educational landscape. In *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, Bryk, Lee, and Holland report "a sense of order and purpose...as shared sense of ownership among teachers and students [that] proudly proclaimed, "This is *our* school."² That Messmer was saved by a small group of parents, alumni, and private donors suggests that this idea of community was present at least one point in the school's history. Similarly, 'social justice' is defined here and applied throughout the school's history by using Bryk, Lee and Holland's application of a contemporary "socially relevant" "emphasis on personal and social responsibility" that seeks to eliminate poverty and inequality rather than a traditional Catholic evangelical philosophy based on "justice

² Ibid., 6-7.

and charity."³ This framework provides the opportunity to both uncover the history of Messmer High School and to determine whether these popular beliefs about Catholic schools are consistent with the experiences of this school.

To understand Messmer High School's past and compare it to the notion of the ideal Catholic school, it is important to consider the interlocking tapestry of Catholic education, Church history, and Milwaukee's own rich heritage, especially in the areas of race and ethnicity as influences external to the school that were (and remain) constantly at play. This complicated blend of influences, especially in the areas of ethnic communities, the specific experiences of ethnic minorities within Catholic schools, and the decline of Catholic schools certainly affected the attitudes, policies, and procedures followed by those associated with Messmer.

A community can be defined through shared ethnic or religious values, and for many Catholics in the twentieth century, ethnicity and religion were nearly synonymous. Similarly, it is nearly impossible to separate the history of Catholic education from the emergence and growth of a powerful American Catholic church, mainly the byproduct of the flood of Irish Catholics that peaked during the middle of the nineteenth century and was especially concentrated in port cities, such as New York and Boston. Highly organized and politically active, they helped create a subculture that, as time passed, became an important social force.⁴ As later immigrants arrived, particularly the Germans (whose numbers peaked in the 1880's), the Italians (in the 1900's), and the Poles and

³ Ibid., 8-9; Charles A. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 151.

⁴ Charles A. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

Slavs (in the 1920's), the Catholic social presence gave rise to an ethnically distinct parish system.

As Catholic immigrants settled in American cities, individual parishes formed for the exclusive benefit of specific ethnic groups. These parishes defined their physical boundaries so clearly that even non-Catholics referred to individual churches when identifying their neighborhood. The parish, moreover, stood for a specific hierarchical position within the Catholic Church as well as a social and spiritual space headed by the politically powerful priest, often the most educated and recognizable man in the community. Because there were few Northern African-Americans and few Catholics in the South, the Catholic concept of race generally referred to country of origin rather than skin color, and while the parish system served to protect and enhance isolated ethnic communities, it also separated them from their neighboring communities.⁵ This segregation becomes especially problematic in urban areas during the great African-American migrations of the twentieth century.

A hallmark of the American Catholic church was its “unwavering belief that the education of the family and church” would be achieved through the parish school movement.⁶ Initially, immigrants established schools primarily to ensure the survival of their faith. Later, the vast waves of immigrants shaped parishes as cultural and educational centers to unite their immediate communities and preserve their ethnic traditions. As Catholics began both to separate from and influence the existing public schools, a variety of responses were generated from the public, the government, and other

⁵ John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁶ Timothy Walch, *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Crossroad-Herder, 1996), 1.

Catholics. As a result, the survival of all Catholic schools depended on the adaptability of parents and church hierarchy. While not a parish school, those within Messmer's academic and geographic boundaries certainly were influenced by the sense of community and the religious identity developed in parishes.⁷

The cocoon of familiar faces, educational ideology, and religious practice provided by urban parish schools was destroyed as parishioners left cities for outlying suburbs. The highly homogenous schools of the fifties were forced to change or close as community demographics changed, and the exodus of white urban residents to the suburbs in the sixties and seventies led to massive closings of both parishes and schools in the eighties, and Messmer was slated to become another victim of changing times. Not surprisingly, then, a major theme in Catholic education, especially since the Vatican II directives of the 1960's is the interconnected survival of both the Church and its schools. Sociologist Andrew Greeley, a fervent supporter of Catholic education, identifies four goals of education: basic skills training, acquisition of cultural values, development of critical intelligence, and creation of scholars. For Greeley, Catholic education is critical for the community of Catholic learners as individuals, family members, and participants in communities. An apparent key to the survival of Catholic schools, especially in urban areas, was attracting racial minorities. According to Greeley, this relationship was mutually beneficial, because in addition to increasing enrollments damaged by suburbanization, Catholic schools produced dramatic improvements in the academic

⁷ Steven Avella's history of the Milwaukee Archdiocese *In the Richness of the Earth* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002) offers a good overview of individual parishes in Milwaukee.

achievement of its minority graduates.⁸ Other studies examining both operational characteristics and minority students in Catholic schools confirm that all levels (elementary and secondary, parish and diocesan) provide a quality education for blacks in particular and also stabilize urban areas.⁹

It is essential to note that despite statistical successes demonstrated by Greeley, as well as Bryk, Holland and Lee, the experiences of students attending Catholic schools were not universally positive, especially in the case of African-American children. While Foster et al cite narratives that tend to present sentimental recollections of the school building and of the staff, they also emphasize that being African-American (and often not Catholic) in a Catholic school created serious challenges. In the North, there usually were only a few black students in the school, and faculty were nearly always white. This resulted in situations in which black students were asked to speak as representatives for their entire race, commanded to speak differently in school than they would in the home, and were forced to withstand the worst of both systemic and individual prejudices.¹⁰

An examination of Messmer High School must take note of Milwaukee's evolving setting and ethno-religious-racial mix. Since its growth from a trading outpost to an industrial center second only to Detroit, Milwaukee has been noted for its rich cultural and ethnic diversity. However, it has also struggled with exclusive ethnic and

⁸ See Andrew M. Greeley, *Catholic Schools and Minority Students*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, Inc. 1982) and William E. Brown and Andrew M. Greeley, *Can Catholic Schools Survive?* New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970).

⁹ See James Youniss and John J. Convey (editors), *Catholic Schools at the Crossroads: Survival and Transformation*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).

¹⁰ See Michele Foster, Janice E. Jackson, and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, editors, *Growing Up African-American in Catholic Schools*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996) for accounts of discrimination and isolation within several tightly knit Catholic and geographic communities.

racial residential enclaves and ensuing periods of turbulence, especially as a result of deindustrialization and increased Civil Rights activism during the 1960's and 1970's.¹¹

Despite its closing in 1984, Messmer High School remains open on the corner of 8th and Capitol. Situated in the middle of a changing political landscape on local and national levels, in the midst of evolving educational systems, of rapidly shifting racial, ethnic and economic bases, and obligated to follow Catholic Doctrine, the school was able to harness the apparent commitment of parents, faculty, and the community at large to keep its doors open. However, it is evident that the school community of like-minded Catholics at the school's origin was not present when it was closed in 1984, and the community that was interested in saving Messmer was either overlooked or underestimated by the Archdiocese. This new community is celebrated as one that transcends race, religion, and social class, although the school struggles with these contradictions as it attempts to maintain its Catholic identity. Therefore, it is important to understand whether this notion of a new community - as presented in Messmer's own admissions material - even exists. Because these educational, religious, and geographic 'communities,' such as Northside Catholics, are often so loosely defined, it is possible that they are *not* present, even though the school claimed to serve them. This allows us entry to an area especially underrepresented in literature: a critical examination of an individual Catholic school.

Tracing the history of Messmer may challenge ideas set forth in *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, one of the most commonly cited works celebrating the success of

¹¹ Excellent accounts of the city's history can be found in Bayrd Still's *Milwaukee: The History of a City* (Madison: Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1948), Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), and John Gurda's *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999).

Catholic education. Beyond this, we can begin to understand the multiple and overlapping communities of influence that serve, define, populate, and support the school. This new understanding of an intersecting community of faith, education, and ethnicity within Milwaukee's unique setting can begin to explain how a school was able to marshal support to save a school that no longer served its intended population, the impact of a private philanthropic organization's contribution, and how a school closed by the archdiocese regained its affiliation.

While the purpose here is to examine the extent to which the school provided a solid curriculum, sustained these communities, and was socially just, situating the history of a single private Catholic high school within existing literature can be a challenging task that involves examining histories of public and Catholic education. This task is further complicated by the fact that historians of public and Catholic education generally have not shared the same philosophical and methodological orientation. The history of Catholic education is essentially one stage behind the general progression of approaches followed within the broader history of education.

Scholarship in history of American education from the first few decades of the twentieth century suggests that the evolution of American education follows a linear trajectory that naturally results in better schools. This approach, commonly associated with Ellwood Cubberley, is most likely to invoke the notion of "eras" to be studied and celebrated for their accomplishments within the emerging field of education.¹²

According to Marvin Lazerson, this interpretation presents "a morality tale linking the

¹² Cubberley noted these political tensions surrounding the creation and management of common schools in a number of volumes that celebrate democracy in education, including *Changing Conceptions of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), *Public School Administration* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), and *Public Education in the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).

evolution of democracy to the triumph of public education” that fully embodied the American ideal of a system that educated students equally and eliminated all differences.¹³ These histories indicate a nobility of mission and superiority of practice that were essential elements of a free society.¹⁴

Later, educational historians such as Lawrence Cremin begin to introduce a critical examination of educational historians’ traditional practice of exulting American schools as champions of democracy and freedom.¹⁵ The systematic professional histories that replaced earlier celebrations of the profession began to attend to forces beyond the schools themselves, including dominant traditions, cultural transmission, and supporting institutions. Revisionist scholarship challenged the notion of a clear progression from common schools to contemporary systems and incorporated a new sensitivity to political and social issues affecting schools and presented a distinct alternative to the sentimental, sepia toned interpretations of schooling offered in the Cubberleyan tradition.¹⁶

The revisionists’ willingness to view reform as a positive change even as they criticized failures to reach satisfactory conclusions or to fully acknowledge the impact of conflict gave rise to the radical revisionists, a group of historians associated with the New Left. While the notion that schools simultaneously respond to current social and economic forces and shape the future direction of those forces was not new - Progressive educators were well aware of the social implications of the school, as evident in George

¹³ Marvin Lazerson, “Revisionism and American Educational History,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 43 (May 1973), 269-283.

¹⁴ Carl Kaestle, “Conflict and Consensus Revisited: Notes toward a Reinterpretation of American Educational History,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 46 (August 1976), 390-396.

¹⁵ See Bernard Bailyn’s *Education in the Forming of the American Society*, and Lawrence Cremin’s *The Transformation of the School*, (New York: Knopf, 1961); and *The American Common School* (New York: Teachers College, 1951).

¹⁶ Reuben Donato and Marvin Lazerson, “New Directions in American Educational History: Problems and Prospects,” *Educational Researcher*, 29 (November 2000) 4-15.

S. Counts' 1927 *The Social Composition of Boards of Education* and his anticapitalist address to the 1932 Progressive Education Association, "Dare Progressive Education Be Progressive?" – the inclusion of these ideas within historical interpretation dramatically changed educational historiography. However, radical revisionist work that does attend to inequity in education often does not focus on the agency of groups that are marginalized; typically the focus is on the victimization rather than the victimized. Michael Katz, the foremost radical revisionist historian, consistently details the extent of social control exerted upon working class students.¹⁷

The advent of new social history gave attention to individuals and groups previously overlooked. Historians of the 1970's present a sharp criticism of racial and class inequality. Despite a suspicion of the motives of nearly anyone in power, a major contribution of Leftist scholarship is its willingness to specifically include those traditionally regarded as "other" and to regard their perspectives as valid, important, and critical to a full understanding of history.¹⁸ A major hallmark of this work is its attention to the experiences of all students within schools, especially those previously ignored. Further, while both social and educational historians have been quite sensitive to the plight of marginalized groups, the presentation of actual experiences of students in a single institution over extended periods of time are uncommon.

The history of schooling has been used to illustrate the impact of external controls. For example, Bowles and Gintis' highly influential economic study, *Schooling*

¹⁷ See Katz' *The Irony of Early School Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968) and *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools* (New York: Praeger, 1971). Other notable works include Joel Spring's *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston: Beacon, 1972), and Karier, Violas, and Spring's *Roots of Crisis* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973).

¹⁸ A more complete explanation of these interpretations can be found in the Alan Brinkley "Prosperity, Depression, and War, 1920-1945.", Thomas Bender "Intellectual and Cultural History", and Alice Kessler-Harris "Social History", in *The New American History (Revised and Expanded Edition)* ed. Eric Foner. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

in Capitalist America, extends the idea of social control with their Marxist exploration of the notion that the economy produces people.¹⁹ Approaches can also incorporate political or ideological elements of more than one genre. For example, David Tyack's interrogation of the role of bureaucratic structures in his landmark *The One Best System* further sets the stage for numerous other studies of conflict between business, other special interests and schools.²⁰ Over time, even as educational history has targeted more specific elements of schooling such as race, class, or gender (and usually only as a single category), the literature still tends to regard "schools" as a universal entity. Additionally, since these histories often make only tangential references to Catholic schools in specific settings, it is necessary to investigate studies that focus exclusively on Catholic education.

The history of Catholic education, while similar in form (and often reliant upon) the history of public education, is quite limited in comparison, even though the Catholic Church is America's largest private educator. There are far fewer volumes published, and the themes investigated within these texts are far more limited than those within the history of public education. This comparative lack of scholarship specifically addressing Catholic schools might be explained by their schools' histories being placed within the much larger and infinitely more complicated Catholic Church. For example, noted Church historians Thomas T. McAvoy and John Tracy Ellis devote considerable portions of their work to Catholic schools.²¹ Jay Dolan's *The American Catholic Experience* and

¹⁹ Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*. (New York: Basic Books, 1976). It is important to note here that economists Bowles and Gintis focus on the capitalist system rather than allowing any agency for students.

²⁰ *The One Best System: A History of American Education*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

²¹ Thomas T. McAvoy, *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969) and John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

Charles Morris' *American Catholic* both serve as excellent examples of contemporary Church histories that include broad surveys of Catholic schools.²²

In comparison to recent trends in the history of public education that identify and challenge inequities, most of the history of Catholic education follows a laudatory pattern that celebrates Catholic schools' triumphs over seemingly ceaseless conflict over anti-Catholic bias. Following the Cubberleyan tradition, these works have "traditionally been directed at confirming Catholic beliefs and commitments to the Church's institutional structure...[that] stressed the heroism and piety of early Catholic missionaries, immigrant patriotism, and Catholic difficulties in times of anti-Catholic agitation."²³ Vincent Lannie's "Church and School Triumphant" insists Catholic church and school histories are virtually inseparable and presents seven general themes within the literature, including a celebratory nature, the compatibility of Catholicism and Americanism, and the hostility of public schools to Catholics.²⁴ These three themes are featured prominently in the works of James A. Burns, whose four major volumes were the standard of Catholic educational history until the 1970's.²⁵ All celebrate a vital American Church from its triumphant rise from missionary beginnings and defend their schools' increased presence in mainstream society.

²² Jay Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience* (Garden City: Doubleday 1985) and Charles Morris, *American Catholic* (New York: Times Books, 1997).

²³ Marvin Lazerson, "Understanding American Catholic Educational History," *History of Education Quarterly*, 3 (Autumn 1977), 297-317.

²⁴ Vincent Lannie, "Church and School triumphant: The Sources of American Catholic Educational Historiography," *History of Education Quarterly*, 16 (Summer 1976)

²⁵ Fr. James A. Burns, *The Catholic School System in the United States: Its Principles, Origins, and Establishment* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908), *The Growth and Development of the Catholic School System in the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1912), *The Principles, Origins, and Establishment of the Catholic School System in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1912), and with Bernard Kohlbrenner, *A History of Catholic Education in the United States* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1937).

In the 1960's, studies of Catholic schools began to take a limited revisionist approach.²⁶ These studies address the reciprocal and multidirectional impact of the Church upon its communities and consider relevant intellectual, social, economic, and political histories.²⁷ While not fully critical of the Church and its expansion, these revisionist works do consider the social implications of both the schools and their Catholic leadership. For example, Neil McCluskey traces the emergence of Catholic schools as a result of Church leadership objecting to public schools acting *in loco parentis*.²⁸ While Catholic revisionism of this period does make attempts to incorporate elements of new social history, it typically retains its celebratory tone and does not challenge Church hierarchy and its schools' policies or address the potential for racism within its schools, themes that were present in works focusing on the history of public education.

Of studies that are limited to Catholic K-12 schools, most fall within a few general categories. Most common are highly laudatory works celebrating the general success and progress of the schools.²⁹ Also common are focused studies relating to specific ethnic groups or geographic areas.³⁰ A smaller number of publications involve educational advances made by individual bishops or the history of specific religious

²⁶ Robert Cross, "Origins of the Catholic Parochial School System in America," *The American Benedictine Review*, XVI (2), Harold A. Buetow, *Of Singular Benefit: The Story of Catholic Education in the United States*. (London: MacMillan, 1970), and Glen Gabert, *In Hoc Signo? A Brief History of Catholic Parochial Education in America* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1973).

²⁷ Especially in the work of Harold Buetow.

²⁸ Neil G. McCluskey, S.J., *Catholic Education in America: A Documentary History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1964).

²⁹ Especially present in the work of James A. Burns.

³⁰ These works are generally written about German and Irish immigrants in New York and Chicago, but a useful local example is Timothy Walch, *The Diverse Origins of American Catholic Education: Chicago, Milwaukee, and the Nation* (New York: Garland, 1988)

orders within Catholic education.³¹ Often, the history of a specific group is used to defend the place of that group within Catholic schools.

Most contemporary histories present Catholic schools as a necessary alternative to common schools, which were a threat to Catholics because of the highly Protestant nature of instructional programming.³² Over time, Catholic schools faced ideological struggles with traditional and modern perspectives of instruction, governance, finance, gender, and ethnicity, although the history of Catholic education tends to approach these issues within the context of a specific organization or religious order. In recent works, this approach is especially interested in the causes and results of changing church leadership, increased operating costs, important court cases, and changes in funding – and maintains the traditional triumphant tone.³³ Volumes that specifically address the establishment and growth of *individual* Catholic schools, their twentieth century heyday, and their current decline are virtually nonexistent.

Although Catholic schools were initially intended to protect and preserve the Catholic faith, they have come to serve an increasing number of non-Catholic students as these schools are widely regarded as an alternative to public schools.³⁴ However, the far more localized existence of specific schools may present a reality far different from the exuberant affirmations depicted in existing literature. The contemporary notion of a progressive, morally just tradition of Catholic education may be correct; however, there is

³¹ See Bertrande Meyers, *Education of Sisters* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1941) and Evangeline Thomas, *Women Religious History Sources* (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1988).

³² Examples of this type of argument are consistently found in the works of both Jay Dolan and Timothy Walch as well as F. Michael Perko's *Enlightening the Next Generation* (New York: Garland 1988).

³³ For an example of this, see John Augenstein, Christopher J. Kauffman, and Robert J. Wister (editors), *One Hundred Years of Catholic Education: Historical Essays in Honor of the Centennial of the National Catholic Educational Association*. (Washington: NCEA, 2003)

³⁴ See Timothy Walch, *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Crossroad-Herder, 1996)

scarce documentation of this within the literature. As Catholic schools are inextricably bound to both the Church as well as the local community, their history holds additional, previously unexplored levels of meaning that can illuminate how a community created and governed by external forces comes to define its place within its Archdiocesan, geographic, and social boundaries.

By focusing on a single location, we can then begin to see whether the celebrated and perhaps mythical notions of the academically excellent and socially just Catholic school as suggested by Bryk, Lee, and Holland are consistent with actual experiences, especially in relation to issues of inclusion and exclusion, concerns of reproducing racial and gender inequalities, and the institutional response to the modern Catholic Church's call to social justice. Over time, then, to what extent has Messmer High School delivered an academically rigorous curriculum, sustained a strong, nurturing community, and been identified as a socially just school?

Since Messmer is being compared here to Bryk, Lee, and Holland's contemporary model of the good Catholic school, it is also important to define the elements examined here. 'Academic excellence' refers primarily to the school's core academic curriculum for all students. 'Community' is defined here as the "communal organization" that "includes the role of a school's tradition and values; the nature of social interactions among students, faculty, administrators, and to a lesser degree, parents; and the ways in which such interactions draw individuals into a shared school life."³⁵ Messmer was envisioned as a community of Catholic learners. However, students came from many different ethnic parishes and later, racial backgrounds. Here, 'social justice' is used to refer to a secular ideal of a free and equitable society.

³⁵ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 127.

This dissertation interrogates the extent to which Messmer High School resembles this ideal through an examination of a variety of primary sources and existing literature relating to the history of the American Catholic church, Catholic schools, and the city of Milwaukee. Messmer's history is explored through many sources, including archived administrative information, newspaper articles, student publications, and personal interviews. Combined, these data provide perspectives of how Messmer compares to the ideal of an academically excellent, community-centered, and socially just Catholic school.

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee archives maintain several files relating directly to Messmer High School. Its main school file contains detailed principals' records and in some cases, personal papers, accounting records, and school improvement plans. Other related files include superintendents' records, school and archdiocesan board of education memoranda, and minutes for both school and archdiocesan meetings. Of particular interest are the exhaustive records of Archdiocesan Superintendent of Schools Monsignor Edmund Goebel. His tenure lasted from 1937 to 1970, and his papers include documentation of increased attention to scientific methods, standardized testing, curricular specialization within high schools, and demographic trends in personnel and student populations. While Goebel commissioned a number of statistical surveys, it is important to note that the findings are almost always presented in the most complimentary fashion possible. A typical example of these surveys is the one administered annually to evaluate his schools' success in reading achievement. However, this supervisory insight is essential in illustrating both the Archdiocesan influence over Messmer's school life and noting changes over time.

While the archdiocese archives at the Cousins Center in St. Francis has been the site of most of my archival work, there are two other archives useful in negotiating the early history of Messmer. The School Sisters of Notre Dame staffed Messmer as both teachers and administrators from 1926 until its closing in 1984. The Milwaukee Province is located in Elm Grove, and the Sisters generously offered a handwritten copy of the first “Messmer Chronicle” written in 1926. While these eyewitness accounts provide unique perspectives from the school’s early years, the SSND archives do not contain entries beyond the 1930’s.

Additionally, the Milwaukee County Historical Society provides details of the changing geographic and ethnic boundaries that surround Messmer. Of particular importance are neighborhood guides sponsored by the city of Milwaukee that briefly describe the history of the twelve 'districts' that comprise the city. Of particular interest here were the West, Near North, and Far North districts, as these areas were home to most of Messmer's students. Newsletters such as the "Eastside Community News" were useful in understanding how local events such as freeway construction and insurance redlining affected individual neighborhoods. Although there are no holdings directly related to Messmer itself, these community biographies, as defined by both the community itself as well as external agencies, include maps and photographs that illustrate the daily life, points of interest, and geographic boundaries for Messmer’s immediate surroundings as well as the parish communities that were home to its students.

The administration of Messmer High School allowed me access to the school’s on-site resources. As a former teacher, I was given free access to the facilities and staff of the school, but the most valuable resource to this point was the school’s collection of

yearbooks, newspapers, and literary magazines. While there are inherent flaws in student publications, even as directed by faculty members, these publications were priceless in illustrating changes in student population, popular student culture, and the impact of local and national events upon the students and faculty. Although “candid” photographs are often posed and reflect only the moment that the picture was taken, *The Capitol* yearbook has proven to be a valuable tool in determining who attended Messmer over the years. In addition to providing countless photographs, most yearbooks provide the home parish and residence address of each graduate; this information greatly simplifies determining the school’s “community” boundaries. Finally, this photographic record provides evidence for the gradual integration of Messmer, a process that began in 1947 with the graduation of three students of color. *The Foursquare* newspaper offers student perspective on events that is missed in administrative records and a timeliness that is missed in the yearbooks. Even though it is a faculty-sponsored publication, student reaction to war, political upheaval, athletic and academic achievements, and campus minutiae is simply not available elsewhere, and is equally critical in determining who Messmer students were.

Articles from the *Milwaukee Journal*, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, *Milwaukee Citizen*, and *Milwaukee Catholic Herald* detail major school events. Since the *Journal* and *Sentinel* serve the entire population of the greater Milwaukee area, these articles generally fall into three broad categories: citywide interest, local interest, and sports. The citywide stories were the most sensational items relating to an occasional scandal or the closing and reopening of the school, while local community interest items were smaller events such as school productions or awards. Since Messmer was traditionally a

basketball powerhouse and usually fielded strong football teams, there is extensive sports coverage for its teams. The *Citizen* and *Herald* stories are more provincial and sympathetic to both the school and the Archdiocese. School plays, trips, award winners and other items of parochial interest were frequent topics. Additionally, Messmer frequently used the *Herald* to place its advertisements for recruitment and school events. The *Catholic Herald* stories were not indexed, but all issues are available on microfilm. The Milwaukee public library has maintained a small clipping file for Messmer, so although the *Journal* and *Sentinel* are not fully indexed, many of the relevant stories were readily available. Beyond this, these newspapers are now archived online through Google News Archives.

Finally, I was able to interview several former teachers, students, and Archdiocesan personnel including former Archbishop Rembert Weakland for their perspectives on the school's history. Statistics, photographs, and yellowing photocopies or handwritten edits of speeches are useful in determining how Messmer changed over time, but in order to understand experiences within what had been the flagship of the Archdiocese, publicly forsaken, and then reborn through private efforts, it is important to talk to people who were there during that time. While some subjects such as Archbishop Weakland were chosen for their specific roles, some volunteered information to me through chance meetings, and I was referred to others by other interview subjects. Five formal interviews followed guidelines established by the American Oral History Association, were semi-structured, and digitally recorded. Five casual interviews were short conversations relating to former students' experiences at Messmer. While oral histories do not provide a complete portrait of the school's history, the opportunity to

understand the emotions of those present at key moments cannot be overvalued, even if their factual recollections may be faded (or enhanced) with the passage of time.

As a former teacher in both public schools and at Messmer High School, my own experiences as both an insider and an outsider to the school present certain loyalties and subjectivities; much of my data is similarly biased. Schools often trigger intense feelings and Messmer alumni can be especially sentimental about their experiences; those who were students during its closing still harbor powerful emotions. However, it is important to acknowledge these experiences and the people who shared them in an attempt to find data that confirms - or disconfirms - the notion of the good Catholic school. These perspectives are important in weaving a narrative that depicts the school over time and are used here to investigate and offer plausible explanations for common ideas about school.

Through the above combination of primary sources, it becomes possible to compare Messmer High School to the ideal Catholic high school that is often celebrated by modern advocates of private education. Multiple sources are critical here. Alone, administrative records can show statistical trends or illuminate academic goals, but there is little mention of the community and how those goals were intended to benefit that community. Student publications offer a far clearer view of their perceptions of various school communities and their place within them, but since these portraits change with each graduating class, the continuity of long-serving staff is missing. Individual recollections are extremely helpful in identifying single perspectives but they can be unreliable in that they only offer a very limited view of a situation – and that view can change with time. However, the plans of Archdiocesan and school officials can be

examined next to the path students actually followed. Personal recollections can be compared to official records and newspaper accounts.

Using the assertions of Bryk, Lee, and Holland as a starting point, this dissertation examines the extent to which Messmer High School, over time, has delivered an academically rigorous curriculum, sustained a strong, nurturing community, and served as a socially just school. The chapters are divided by key points in the history of Messmer High School that mark its movement from a school designed for Northside Catholics to a Catholic school for Northside students. This chronology is determined by events that were significant to the school, so there are divergences with major political, social, and educational trends. For example, chapter three comprises the years of Fr. Voelker's principalship, a time that spans the critical historical periods between the Great Depression and the immediate post-World War II years. Each chapter begins with an overview of the demographics of the neighborhood surrounding Messmer and notes significant local and national events that shaped the daily proceedings, both socially and academically, within the school. Each chapter is then organized thematically to address the school's commitment academic excellence, the extent to which it nurtures a sense of community, and its response to larger social justice issues.

The school's initial opening in 1926 and graduation of its first official class in 1934 are the focus of the second chapter. Of the three key elements of the ideal Catholic school, the single most prominent feature at this time was strong sense of community that is especially religious in nature. From Archbishop Sebastian Messmer's invitation to the School Sisters of Notre Dame to begin administration of the first diocesan high school in Milwaukee, it was clear that this new school was necessary to serve the large number of

area Catholics who were without a school of their own, and this attention to its Catholic identity, especially through its staff, curriculum, and daily practices supersedes social justice concerns or even a desire for academic excellence. Primary sources for this chapter include records from the School Sisters of Notre Dame and the Capuchins that detail the opening of a new school, the construction and move to Messmer High School, its initial administration, and its first graduating class.

Chapter three covers a period of stability and tremendous growth from 1935 to 1947, the tenure of its only long term principal, John M. Voelker, who served from 1932 until his retirement in 1947. Messmer was solid academically and its identity continued to be strong and faith-based. The racial homogeneity and its wide range of athletic, cultural, and religious extracurricular activities served as its anchors. As in the earlier years, the school's primary trait as a model school was its strong religious community, and social outreach was almost certainly driven by a religious response to the Depression and World War II. Additionally, Messmer took an active role in defining itself as an active member of the community in the years following World War II through its enthusiastic community outreach, including a Braille program, memorials for graduates who died at war, and powerful football and basketball teams. The primary sources of data for this chapter include Voelker's collected papers and Messmer's yearbooks. Messmer was deeply affected by World War II, and the school's archives have several pieces that reveal its connection to classmates who served in the military, including a journal of visits from servicemen kept by then assistant principal Louis Reidel and a student-sponsored memorial for gold star alumni. Additionally, the Citizen-Herald

provides extensive coverage of nearly all school events, which offers some indication of the importance and influence of the school to the rest of the city.

The fourth chapter examines the school from 1948 to 1970 as the invisible boundaries of ethnic parishes fade as families begin to move to the suburbs and the school becomes less racially homogenous. It is during early portion of this period that the school most closely resembles the ideal school described by Bryk, Lee, and Holland. Messmer had diverse course offerings and facilities, it maintained a solid religious, athletic, and social presence, and it began to integrate culturally and racially. Divisions began to appear, though. The 1958 construction of Interstate 43 separated the school both physically and emotionally from its natural geographic constituency of neighboring parishes. Certainly, the physical divisions created by road construction were exacerbated by social divisions stemming from initial white flight to the suburbs and decreasing numbers of religious faculty. While school activities took a more social outreach approach, religious activities became less prominent. More lay faculty were hired and the School Sisters stopped wearing their traditional habits. In fact, for the first time protestant churches (or no affiliation at all) were listed in the student directories. Beyond this, extracurricular activities no longer served as a unifying factor for students. Messmer remained an athletic force, but its service and cultural clubs were replaced with casual or social groups. Further, extracurricular activities and student clubs began to show a racial divide. For examples, cheerleaders were almost always white while the pompon squad were almost always black. Primary sources include Archdiocesan records, Edmund J. Goebel's papers, Messmer's yearbooks, and papers from the John M. Voelker collection.

Chapter five explores the period from 1971 to 1990 that was marked by Messmer's closing, subsequent reopening, and its early struggle to regain its footing. During this period in which private Catholic high schools were being hailed as superior to public schools, few of Bryk, Lee, and Holland's traits of the 'the good Catholic school' were present at Messmer. By the end of the Seventies, the school could no longer be regarded as academically adequate and the strong community that had once been its hallmark was nearly gone. In fact, in 1977, one thousand families left the St. Elizabeth parish. It appears that ending the school's Archdiocesan affiliation was essential at this time because the new school community of students of all faiths had actually begun to erode Messmer's Catholic identity. A number of factors, including a steady decline in enrollment and increased operating costs due to the growing numbers of lay faculty factor into the official justification for closing, but accreditation and governance issues were also significant. Ultimately, Archbishop Rembert Weakland decided to close Messmer in 1984. Despite the belief that there was no alternative, a small band of parents mobilized the community, sued to prevent the sale of the school, solicited alumni, businesses, and the private DeRance foundation for donations, and was able to reopen the school in the same year. Messmer's closing may have been a best case scenario for nearly everyone involved. The Archdiocese could not continue to subsidize a school that in addition to having major concerns over its accreditation was also losing money, enrollment, and staff. For Messmer, the closing and subsequent reopening forced the school to recreate itself. Its redesigned mission as a Catholic school that served all interested students, regardless of faith or ability to pay tuition could not have emerged under Archdiocesan control, and after a rough beginning, Messmer was able to secure a stable, committed

faculty and a solid enrollment. Primary sources include Archdiocesan records, articles from the *Milwaukee Journal*, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, and personal interviews with the Archbishop, a former teacher, and a former student.

Chapter six examines the school from 1991 to its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2001 and the degree to which the 'new' Messmer served as an example of a good Catholic school. Even without solid evidence to support their claims, advocates of school choice presented Messmer as a model of the success of the program. Although Messmer regained its archdiocesan affiliation and opened its own elementary school, the school was not academically rigorous, did not maintain a strong Catholic identity or extended community, and did not serve as an example or agent of social justice. Despite this, however, enrollment was stronger than it had been in decades and Messmer even maintained a waiting list for new students. Tuition costs were supplemented by the school's participation in programs such as Parents Advancing Values in Education and the Milwaukee Parental Choice program. While the school was often cited as a success story for urban Catholic schools, the modern version of the school bore little resemblance to the academically rigorous, deeply religious, and socially activist Catholic school. Primary sources include *Milwaukee Journal* and *Catholic Herald* articles, interviews, the school's accreditation self-study, and statistics from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Clearly, definitions of academic excellence, the communities that serve (and were served by) Messmer High School, and the school's concept of social justice have changed over time. However, by comparing the school's history to the ideal Catholic school described by Bryk, Lee, and Holland, we can begin to understand how Messmer came to

be, how it can continue to remain in operation, and how it serves a student body that continues to shift culturally, economically, and racially.

CHAPTER TWO

WE SEEK NEW TRAILS

Trails, what queer things they are! Did you ever consider that a world of symbolism they embody?

Hilaire Belloc tells us: "It is the Road which determines the sites of many cities and the growth and nourishment of all. It is the Road that gives its framework to all economic development. It is the Road which is the channel of all trade, and, what is more important, of all ideas."

And so it is that Class '30 has chosen the line, "WE SEEK NEW TRAILS," to convey its message and portray its symbol.

The highway spells eternity. As it rolls on in its never-ending course it perpetuates the thought of ending time.

-The Reverend E.J. Goebel, 1930 *Messmer Trail Book*

When Diocesan High School opened in 1926, the need for a high school on Milwaukee's north side was so great that the archdiocese could not wait to build a school; the school that would become Messmer first held classes in the basement of an old parish school until a suitable location could be found. Milwaukee's north side had many parishes with their own schools, but the number of high schools were limited. In fact, there were only three options: St. Anthony's parish high school, Marquette High School, and St. John's Institute. The latter two schools were only available to boys and none was convenient to Northside students. There was a growing concern among Catholic educators that extending Catholic education to the high school level was an essential need for teenagers who required the "blend of religious instruction, liturgical and devotional

life, and above all, moral instruction."³⁶ This need for additional religious instruction for young Catholics (rather than the need for additional schooling) was the driving force behind the new school. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the earliest years of the school, the creation of strong religious community was the most prominent of the ideals presented by Bryk, Lee, and Holland.

Milwaukee, like the rest of America during the Twenties, began to experience a period of tremendous change in nearly every element of daily life. A dramatic growth in the population created a great demand for Catholic high schools that could extend the religious instruction that had begun in the churches and parish schools. From 1890 to 1920, the city's population had grown by sixty percent, reaching 460,194 in 1920. By 1926, the number had reached a robust 530,000³⁷. This growth certainly can be attributed to a dramatic increase in industrial jobs, especially in companies such as Falk, Harnischfeger, Allis-Chalmers, and A.O. Smith, initially created by World War I demands and sustained by enormous growth in the automotive industry.

By 1920, over three quarters of Milwaukee's residents were native-born. Germans were still the largest immigrant group, followed by Poles.³⁸ These groups tended to live in fairly exclusive neighborhoods. For example, the Third Ward area downtown was almost entirely Italian. The village of North Milwaukee, which was bordered by Capitol and Silver Spring Drives, Sherman Boulevard and 27th Street, was almost entirely German. Directly south was the Sherman Park area, bordered by North and Capitol Avenues, Sherman Boulevard and 27th Street, a mix of both German and

³⁶ Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth*, 461.

³⁷ *Milwaukee County City Suburbs Today and Yesterday – A Statistical History of the Community*. Research Clearinghouse of Metropolitan Milwaukee. (Milwaukee: The Milwaukee Journal, 1950), 105.

³⁸ Bayrd Still, *Milwaukee, The History of a City*. (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948), 574-5.

Czech.³⁹ The Near North Side neighborhoods now known as Riverwest, North Division, Park West, and Brewer's Hill were all initially settled by Germans but by World War I had become home to an increasing number of Poles and Czechs.⁴⁰ Regardless of ethnicity, none of these neighborhoods was especially wealthy, and most residents were, at best, working class.



Figure 2.1: Cornerstone Address, 1926. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

The two largest religious faiths were Roman Catholic and Lutheran. In 1926, there were 59 Catholic churches with 159,375 registered members.⁴¹ Among Catholics, Germans were the most common ethnicity and Poles had replaced Irish as the second most prevalent group. Additionally, like the Irish, Poles were almost exclusively Catholic.⁴² African Americans were limited to a very small residential pocket bordered by State Street, North Avenue and Third and Twelfth Streets.⁴³ While the majority of

³⁹ John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999), 250.

⁴⁰ *Discover Milwaukee*. Milwaukee: Department of City Development 1986.

⁴¹ *Milwaukee County City Suburbs Today and Yesterday – A Statistical History of the Community*. 120.

⁴² Steven Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002).

⁴³ Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

these residents were not Catholic, St. Benedict the Moor served as their primary Catholic church.⁴⁴

For immigrants, religion often represented a connection to the traditions and culture of their home country. Catholic immigrants were drawn to churches not only for worship but also for the comfort of social networks, the leadership and guidance of the parish priest, and the familiar structure of Church hierarchy. However, these benefits were not without cost. The relative isolation of ethnic communities led to clear, if not always visible, divisions among citizens, even those of the same religious faith.⁴⁵

Despite this, Catholicism often led to an extreme interest in schools. Catholics were directed to send their children to Catholic schools both to extend the moral education begun in the home and church and to protect children from anti-Catholic sentiments in public schools. Despite the prevalence of ethnic parishes, the neighborhood schools Catholic children in Milwaukee attended were not always parish schools. Archbishop Messmer insisted that Catholics attend Catholic schools; however, the majority of students did not. In 1926, there were 147,260 enrolled in schools, which was about 70% of the school-age population. Of these students, 31,770 attended private schools.⁴⁶ This could be attributed to a shortage of schools or the prohibitive cost of private education, but there is a clear divide between the educational expectations of the Archbishop and Milwaukee Catholics' ability to comply.

The increase in Polish Catholics became a source of local conflict for Milwaukee's Archbishop Sebastian Messmer. The Swiss-born Messmer was no stranger

⁴⁴ Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth*, 317 and 532.

⁴⁵ John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁴⁶ *Milwaukee County City Suburbs Today and Yesterday – A Statistical History of the Community*. 22.

to issues of ethnic bias and before coming to Milwaukee in 1903 was a supporter of what he called ‘nationality’ in his defense of German-language organizations. Even so, he recognized the importance of uniting as Americans and saw language as a means to unite Catholics. This view, as well as the fact that he often favored German causes, led to objections over his nomination as Milwaukee’s Archbishop. The primary concern among those opposed to Messmer was that moving toward delivering Masses exclusively in English, as he had done in Green Bay, would alienate the increasing number of Polish Catholics in Milwaukee and disrupt the relative goodwill between the many ethnic parishes.⁴⁷

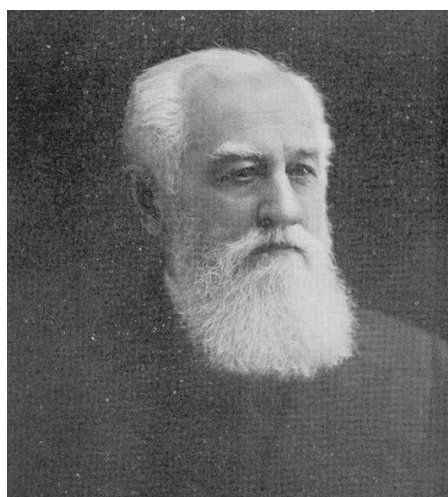


Figure 2.2: Archbishop Sebastian Messmer. Source: Messmer Capitol

The language of the Church did indeed become an issue for Messmer. Because of Bismarck’s attempt to Germanize Poles following the German unification in 1871, Polish immigrants were especially sensitive to any attempts to prevent them from speaking their own language.⁴⁸ In Milwaukee, Poles were already bristling against German influences in its public schools and had begun to lobby for Polish-language instruction in the public

⁴⁷ Avella, *In The Richness of the Earth*, 310.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

high schools. It should have not been a surprise, then, that Polish Catholics were offended by Messmer's hopes of Americanizing Catholics by delivering the Mass in English. In 1905, Polish Catholics in Milwaukee began to petition for a separate Polish diocese. The conflict with the Archbishop wasn't fully resolved until 1913, when Messmer appointed Father Edward Kozlowski as an auxiliary bishop and assumed financial responsibility for the construction expense of St. Josaphat's Church.⁴⁹ When other parishes objected to having to pay the enormous debt, Messmer responded simply, "Let none say: It is a Polish affair, let the Polish parishes help St. Josephat. No, it is a Catholic affair, and every Catholic of the diocese, whatever his nationality, must feel that it concerns our common Catholic faith."⁵⁰ Messmer was consistent in his call for unity among ethnic Catholics. He spoke in English to all of his priests, shocking the Germans, and commissioned the *Catholic Herald* as the official newspaper of the archdiocese, a move designed to counter partisan reporting from two German-language papers, *The Excelsior* and *Columbia*, the Polish-language *Kuryer*, and the Irish-published *Catholic Citizen*.⁵¹

Politically, Milwaukee was still heavily influenced by Socialists, despite unpopularity stemming from anti-German feelings after World War I and condemnation from the Catholic Church. Milwaukee certainly benefited from the efficiency of socialist government, higher minimum wages, and the standard eight hour work day. It also enjoyed the stability of long-term leaders. Daniel Hoan was elected mayor in 1916 and remained in office for nearly a quarter century. Archbishop Messmer himself regarded

⁴⁹ Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth*, 326.

⁵⁰ Sebastian Messmer, Circular letter, April 28, 1911. Cited in Benjamin J. Blied, *Three Archbishops of Milwaukee*. (Milwaukee: Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1955). 120

⁵¹ Benjamin J. Blied, *Three Archbishops of Milwaukee*. (Milwaukee: Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1955). 118, 320.

socialism as an “insidious theory” that “is spread broadcast among our laboring classes and a fertile soil for its rapid growth is prepared in the minds of the children of the land, unconsciously perhaps, yet none the less efficaciously, by the unsectarian principal of our public school.”⁵² The Socialist state, in particular, represented an offensive erosion of the rights of parents (and, presumably the Church) to educate and otherwise provide for their own children. As it was, in his view, the parents’ obligation to provide meals, books, and transportation, the state should have no part in providing these things free of charge to any student in any school, public or private. This position seems harsh, especially considering that many Catholics were immigrant or working poor. Although he was opposed to the state intruding upon Catholic schools and resented the ‘double tax’ upon Catholics who paid taxes for unused public schooling in addition to tuition for the private education of their children, he was unwilling to accept any sort of public assistance that would relieve some of the economic burden caused by the additional ‘taxation.’⁵³

Education was an important part of Archbishop Messmer's plans for Milwaukee. He taught for several years at Seton Hall University and was asked to serve on the Third Plenary Council that determined, among other things, that all Catholic children attend Catholic schools. He was consistent and clear in his belief that public schools without religion were inherently harmful to Catholics and that parents must send their children to Catholic schools. If Catholic schools were unavailable, parents were to do everything in their power to ensure a proper moral education that protected their Catholic faith. As stated earlier, the vast majority of school-aged Catholic children did not attend private schools.

⁵² Sebastian Messmer, Circular letter, November 17, 1914. Cited in Blied, 142.

⁵³ Benjamin J. Blied, *Three Archbishops of Milwaukee*. (Milwaukee: Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1955). 133.

As the number of public high schools increased, so did the need for Catholic high schools. However, it was important to respond to the demand wisely. In 1911, Messmer wrote, “it is certainly a mistake to have too many high schools in a limited space in neighboring parishes. There ought to be a system devised, or at least we ought to come to some general agreement that in cities the parishes will combine in maintaining a high school.”⁵⁴ As Archbishop, Messmer would ensure a streamlined system of Catholic schools in terms of standardized curricula, uniform operating practices, and a centralized system of administration.

When a 1926 survey indicated that barely a quarter of parish grade school students attended a Catholic high school, Father George Meyer created a new, coeducational high school. Because the need was so urgent, the archdiocese decided to create a provisional school until a permanent location could be found.⁵⁵ The site for the temporary home was easy to find; the parish school at St. Elizabeth, located at Burleigh and 2nd, had recently expanded and the old facility could be called back into service until the new high school was completed. Father Meyer served as principal, parish priest Reverend Celestine Bittle oversaw the modifications to the building, and teachers were requested from the School Sisters of Notre Dame.⁵⁶

Because the new diocesan high school was intended to serve as a central high school that served multiple parishes, finding its permanent location was the source of great debate. Although representatives from parishes in the southern and more remote areas of the archdiocese were concerned that they would be unable to access the new school, especially since there would be no boarding facilities, the bias toward a north side

⁵⁴ *America*, October 25, 1952, p. 93. Cited in Blied, 144

⁵⁵ *Catholic Herald*, 15 April, 1926.

⁵⁶ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, 3 June, 1926.

location could not be countered. In 1927, the discussion ended when the archdiocese purchased a parcel of land on Capitol Drive. However, this was intended as just the first step in creating a network of central high schools with at least one school dedicated to each of the northern, southern, and western sections of the city.⁵⁷



Figure 2.3: St. Elizabeth's School. Source: Messmer Capitol

One hundred students were expected to enroll, and on September 4th, five School Sisters of Notre Dame were dispatched to handle all teaching assignments. However, when over 160 “eager and interesting boys and girls appeared”⁵⁸ for classes on the following Tuesday, the overwhelmed sisters decided to simply issue books and supplies. Diocesan High School officially opened a week later with 26 sophomores and 140 freshmen, an additional teacher, and a formal dedication by Archbishop Messmer, who expected the school’s enrollment to reach 200 before the end of the year.⁵⁹

There was no on-site housing for the sisters, so the school initially planned to provide daily transportation to and from the motherhouse. However, this became

⁵⁷ “Messmer High School.” Unsigned school history, 1945. Page 4. Messmer High School archives. Box 1.

⁵⁸ The School Sisters of Notre Dame, “The Messmer Chronicle.” Unsigned convent journal. September 4, 1926.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

unnecessary when a seven-room apartment close to the school became available. This housing would not be ready for several weeks, so the sisters stayed in an unused classroom and the Sisters of St. Elizabeth's parish community welcomed the SSND at their own convent table until they could move. "Landing Day" was Tuesday, October 12, and despite the morning rain, all were "delighted" with their new home.⁶⁰ It is unfortunate that their convent journal does not contain more detail about this experience; one wonders how an already overwhelmed school could have an extra classroom, how this classroom was configured to house six women, and whether the sisters had any input or choice in the matter.

Diocesan High School's administration and faculty has been established earlier in the summer. Reverend Celestine Bittle served as principal and Sister Mary Dominic Cunningham served as both Vice Principal and taught civics and history. Sister Mary Seraphia Maline taught science and civics; Sister Mary Everildis Duschak taught commercial classes; Sister Mary Fidelis Krilhoc taught Latin; and Sister Mary Angela King taught English. The sixth sister, Novice Mary Frances Jerome Uriell taught mathematics to the first year students, and Sister Mary Hildabeska was responsible for housekeeping. Religion classes were taught by Reverend Meyer, the pastor of nearby Holy Angels, and Reverend Leo Hargarten, OFM. Physical education programs were overseen by Mr. G.W. Carnahan, the director of physical education at the St. Francis Seminary. In order to improve their teaching, Sisters Mary Angela, Mary Fidelis, Mary Seraphia, and Mary Dominic were sent to Chicago to attend the National Association of Teachers of Science and Mathematics annual conference.⁶¹ Mary Angela and Mary

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ SSND Chronicle, November 25, 1926.

Dominic would also spend a week in March at the North Central Association of High Schools and Colleges conference.

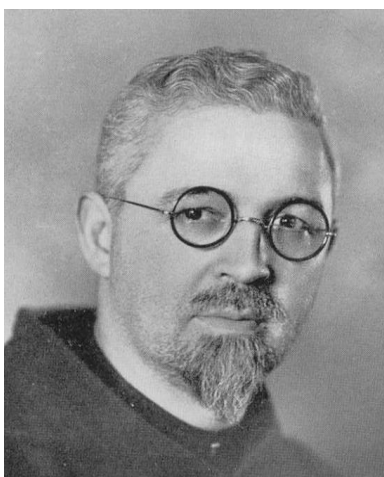


Figure 2.4: Reverend Celestine Bittle. Source: Messmer Capitol

Diocesan High School opened for its second year on September 7th, 1927. In addition to the returning sophomores and juniors, a new freshman class was welcomed.⁶² Of the 280 students enrolled, 122 were freshmen, 132 were sophomores, and 26 were juniors.⁶³ George Meyer, who had taught religion the previous year, was named principal of the school after Celestine Bittle's province transferred him to Appleton.⁶⁴ In the Mass opening the year, Fr. Meyer reminded students, "You are here to be educated. To be educated means to be led in the way of all truth. If you choose falsehood, your education is a failure." He challenged the boys to become men who dare, like Lindbergh, and the girls to become "good and gentle and sweet" women, like Mary, wished them all a successful year, and prayed for their success.⁶⁵

⁶² *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, 1 September, 1927; 2.

⁶³ *Messmer Foursquare* 1, no. 1, page 1. 11/27.

⁶⁴ *The Messmer*, 1929 Messmer High School yearbook

⁶⁵ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, 15 September, 1927; 2.

Adding to the excitement of the new academic year, the archdiocese announced that a site for the new school had not only been located but that the purchase had also been finalized.⁶⁶ Students were eager to relocate to their new school, and John Jacoby contributed the following poem for the schools' monthly newspaper, *The Foursquare*:

If all our hobbies were horses,
And dreams came true as a rule
We'd all be riding Capitol Drive
Into a brand new school.⁶⁷

Even with the optimism of nearly everyone involved, there were significant delays prior to the construction of the new school. Fundraising proved to be difficult and only the sale of bonds generated enough revenue to begin work.⁶⁸ Architects William Herbst and Edwin Krenzli were awarded the design contract and by 1928 plans for a three story "collegiate Gothic style" building with a basement area for a cafeteria, gymnasium, and pool had been thoroughly discussed and drawn.⁶⁹ Additionally, a convent building would adjoin the school. The high school was intended to be a showcase for the archdiocese and included a great deal of high-quality craftsmanship, including marble staircases, oak cabinetry work, and terrazzo and cement finish work. Construction began the following year. When complete, the building would have a capacity of 850 students and cost over \$650,000.⁷⁰

In late October 1928, Diocesan High School officially changed its name to honor the Archbishop who had called for its construction. According to the *Herald Citizen*, students had made several requests for the name change because they wished to reflect

⁶⁶ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, 6 September, 1927; 2.

⁶⁷ *Messmer Foursquare*. Reprinted in Volume 3, issue 5; 1.

⁶⁸ Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth*, 462.

⁶⁹ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, 23 May, 1929; 6.

⁷⁰ Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives. Messmer High School Box 3, File 2 – Building Contracts.

their love and admiration of “their chief spiritual authority...a writer of scholarly books, as an advocate of Catholic education whose leadership is recognized and welcomed beyond the limits of his archdiocese and those of this country.”⁷¹ While it seems unlikely that students would have been that vigorous in their request for a name change, it is clear that the Messmer namesake was intended to reflect the ideal that this school, and the others that would follow, belonged to the members of the Archdiocese rather than to any single parish. A more cynical interpretation would suggest that name reflected the idea that the school belonged to the archbishop who insisted the central high school was needed.

For the 1929-30 school year, Father Edmund Goebel was selected to serve as the principal of the new Messmer High School. In addition to managing the daily affairs of the school, Goebel was charged with the responsibility of directing the lengthy move from St. Elizabeth’s to the new building. Work on the school had progressed steadily over the summer months, and the brick and terra cotta building was starting to come together. The first floor would house general and principal’s offices, the chapel, the varsity locker room, and nine classrooms. The second floor held the main entrance to the two-story auditorium, the library and study halls, and six classrooms. The third floor would be reserved for ten science classrooms and their associated laboratories.⁷²

On Thursday, September 19, 1929, vicar general Monsignor Bernard Traudt laid the cornerstone of Messmer High School. It was a large ceremony open to the public. Men and women from all over the city gathered outside of the school’s south walls to hear Superintendent Barbian and principal Goebel speak. At this time, the school was

⁷¹ *Milwaukee Catholic Citizen*, 10 November, 1928; 3.

⁷² *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, 12 September, 1929; 7.

expected to open in early January.⁷³ In the meantime, students and teachers continued to work as usual at their temporary parish home, and during this week, Messmer held its first PTA meeting back at the St. Elizabeth's location.⁷⁴



Figure 2.5: Rooftop View of Ceremony. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

On Monday, March 3rd, the school finally opened. The previous Saturday, Monsignor Goebel assembled a volunteer moving crew that included a large number of students to move all of the school's equipment and supplies into the new school. The equipment was moved in a single truck and the school still used canvas doors on the first day.⁷⁵ Only the classrooms were complete – the swimming pool, auditorium and gymnasium were not scheduled to be complete for an additional month.⁷⁶ By this time, enrollment had grown to 502 students. The faculty had grown as well; there were sixteen School Sisters of Notre Dame and six lay teachers in addition to the priests who taught

⁷³ *Milwaukee Catholic Citizen*, 14 September, 1929; 3.

⁷⁴ *Milwaukee Catholic Citizen*, 28 September, 1929.

⁷⁵ *Messmer Foursquare*, 27 September, 1943.

⁷⁶ *Milwaukee Catholic Citizen*, 8 March, 1930, 3.

religion.⁷⁷ This is a tremendous increase in staff. In just over three years, the faculty and student populations had more than tripled in size. This growth certainly supported the Archbishop's insistence that a new high school was needed.⁷⁸

The March issue of *The Foursquare* was dedicated to Archbishop Messmer. In addition to serving as a tribute to their leader, this particular issue was intended to be a guide to the new school, its faculty and students, and their course of study. The fifty-four page guide featured student commentary from all four classes, the school's administrators, and brief explanations of each of the courses offered from individual disciplines. There was no controversy over foreign language classes: students could choose from Latin, Polish, German, or French.⁷⁹

The school's dedication was held on May 12, 1930. The Archbishop sat near the altar and spoke briefly during the solemn high Mass held in the school's auditorium. The Mass, attended by over a thousand people, was sung by the archdiocesan vicar general Right Reverend Monsignor Bernard Traudt.⁸⁰ The dedication sermon was delivered by Celestine Bittle, who had returned to Milwaukee from Appleton for the occasion to honor the Archbishop and celebrate the school's mission of "true training."⁸¹ He explained, "Facts without faith cannot train boys and girls for God-fearing lives. Religion is the only source of true morality. It should be a second nature, a thing lived with every day of

⁷⁷"Messmer High School," Unsigned school history, 1945. Page 5. Messmer High School archives. Box 1.

⁷⁸ According to NCES statistics, enrollment in Catholic secondary schools had almost doubled from 129,848 in 1919-1920 to 241,869 in 1929-1930. (National Center for Education Statistics *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait.* (January, 1993)

⁷⁹ *Messmer Foursquare* 3, no. 6. March, 1930.

⁸⁰ "Messmer High School," Unsigned school history, 1945. Messmer High School archives. Box 1.

⁸¹ *Messmer Foursquare* 8, June 1930

the year, not a garment for Sunday only.”⁸² Following the Mass, there was dinner for the nearly 100 priests in attendance.

Messmer graduated its first class of seniors on Friday, June 13, with one hundred students receiving diplomas. The traditional yearbook was replaced by an advertisement-free ‘trail book’ to commemorate the time these students spent as pioneers for the Archdiocese’s first central high school.⁸³ Under the direction of the school’s news writing class, the students gave detailed biographies of themselves and their experiences within the school.

The opening of the first full year in the new building began with reports of a great loss to the archdiocese. In August of 1930, Archbishop Messmer died while visiting his hometown of Goldach, Switzerland.⁸⁴ He had been ill for some time, but students and staff of the school bearing his name were said to have been quite saddened with the news of his passing. Although Messmer’s burial was in Goldach, there were numerous Masses and devotions in his memory, both for the public and for students at the high school.

Meanwhile, the school continued to grow. Only in its fifth year, its enrollment already reached 650. Because of the increase, five new classes and ten more teachers were added.⁸⁵ The official opening began with a Mass in the school’s auditorium.

The auditorium proved to be a busy place. There was almost always some production under way. The junior and senior classes produced their own plays, and each individual home room produced an original one-act play. In addition, there were school-wide comedy, drama, and musicals each year. Students also participated in holiday

⁸² *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, 15 May, 1930, 1.

⁸³ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, 5 June, 1930, 2.

⁸⁴ *Milwaukee Catholic Citizen*, 9 August, 1930; 1.

⁸⁵ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*. 11 September, 1930; “Messmer High School.” Unsigned school history, 1945; 5. Messmer High School archives. Box 1.

festivals, orchestra events, and choral concerts. Finally, Messmer allowed other groups to use the auditorium as well. For example, The St. Joseph Players chose Messmer as the venue for their annual Passion Play, and this selection was believed to be a great honor for the school.⁸⁶

Any doubts that the Archdiocese of Milwaukee actually needed a new high school were easily dispelled with the explosive growth in attendance at Messmer. When Superintendent Barbian welcomed new freshmen for the 1931-1932 school year, Messmer noted another dramatic increase in enrollment, this time reaching a total of 800 students.⁸⁷ It should also be noted that according to the student directory in the *Capitol*, most of the students came from the neighboring areas. This would support the Archdiocese's plans to create other centralized high schools for the southern and western portions of the city. Although the high school was open to any student in the archdiocese, the majority of Messmer's students came from the nearby parishes of St. Casimir, St. Mary of Czestochowa, and Holy Angels.⁸⁸ At any rate, student reports indicated that they enjoyed the "large student body," faculty, and facilities of their new school. In particular, Cyril Vogt appreciated the "friendly, religious atmosphere" and Helene Porter noted the "cooperation among the students."⁸⁹ While there's no reason to suggest that there wouldn't be cooperation, St. Casimir and St. Mary were Polish parishes, Holy Angels was mostly German. The students from the Polish parishes travelled a greater distance to Messmer than the German students, and it is possible that students would retain some of their home parish nationalism, even in their new school.

⁸⁶ *Messmer Foursquare* 5, no. 6. March 1932.

⁸⁶ *Milwaukee Catholic Citizen*, 9 August, 1930, 1.

⁸⁷ "Messmer High School." Unsigned school history, 1945. Messmer High School archives. Box 1.

⁸⁸ *Messmer Capitol*. 1932, Senior Section.

⁸⁹ *Messmer Foursquare* 5, no. 4, December 1932.

The teaching staff relocated to their new convent, a two story building with over 20 bedrooms, recreation, dining, and community rooms, infirmary and chapel.⁹⁰ The School Sisters of Notre Dame were committed to expanding their teaching skills, and Mother Superior made sure that the sisters attended relevant conferences and professional meetings.⁹¹ Messmer continued its tradition of representing the Archdiocese at major events. For example, Edmund Goebel was sent to Washington in May of 1932 for the annual meetings of the National Catholic Educators Association⁹² and Miss Barry, a physical education instructor, was sent to Ireland for a Eucharistic Congress.⁹³ Finally, in the fall of 1932, Messmer hosted fourteen student teachers from the newly opened Mount Mary College.⁹⁴

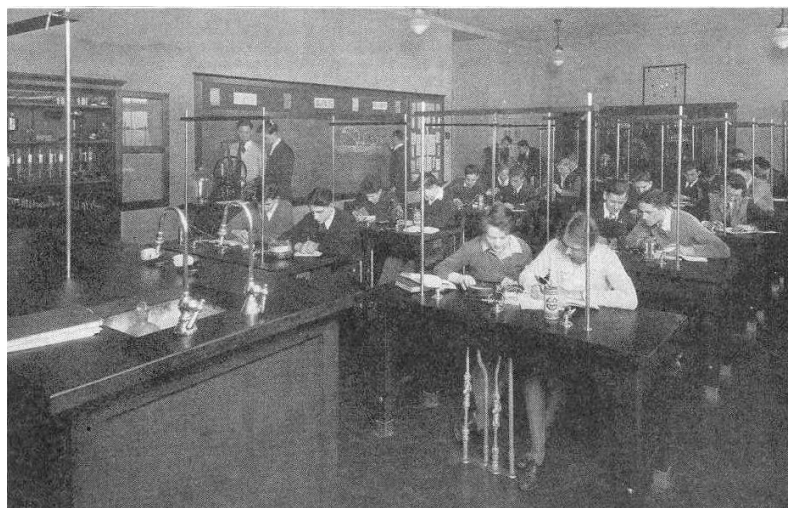


Figure 2.6: Science Students at Work in 1930. Source: Messmer Capitol

⁹⁰ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, 23 May, 1929, 6.

⁹¹ *Messmer Foursquare*. 1931-1933. Many issues of the newspaper contain a “Teachers’ Travel Notes” section to report the location and subject of any conference or meeting attended by teachers or administration. The first issue of each year also contains descriptions of any summer classes taken by faculty.

⁹² *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*, 31 March, 1932; 3.

⁹³ *Messmer Foursquare* 6, no. 1. October 1932.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

The enrollment of 279 freshmen for the 1932-1933 school year meant that Messmer had already passed its 850 student capacity. In only its seventh year, the school had shown a 578% increase in enrollment since opening at St. Elizabeth's.⁹⁵ Certainly, no one could have predicted this incredible amount of growth, especially during the Depression, but Messmer seemed to take its rising enrollment in stride. The affiliation with the School Sisters of Notre Dame was effective in that the Sisters' order prepared them for classrooms and if more teachers were needed, the Elm Grove motherhouse was able to supply them in short order.

At the end of 1932, Messmer High School was ready to enter the next phase of its development. It had found its permanent location, moved to a beautiful, state of the art building, secured a quality teaching staff and administration, and gained a solid and ever increasing body of students. By 1933, Messmer High School was no longer a new arrival but had become an emerging member of the community.

After having their school and its construction a topic of conversation for several years, Messmer students also began making a name for themselves outside of the school. In 1933, Joseph Brendler placed first out of 18,000 entries in the national Gorgas Memorial Institute science essay competition. Brendler's winnings included a two hundred dollar trip to Washington, DC, where he was presented his medal and five hundred dollars by President Roosevelt. Then, over a live NBC radio broadcast, he read his essay about the public health issues caused by mosquitoes.⁹⁶ On December 8, a group of students traveled to WISN radio in Milwaukee. While there, they served in all positions at the station except for control operations. The football team won its first

⁹⁵ "Messmer High School." Unsigned school history, 1945. Messmer High School archives. Box 1.

⁹⁶ *Messmer Foursquare* 7, no. 2. November 1933, 1.

conference championship, and 21 students received Gregg Awards in a national shorthand and secretarial competition.⁹⁷

In the earliest years of Messmer High School, the school appears to exhibit the three characteristics noted by Bryk, Lee, and Holland. While the focus in archived records is simply on the school's opening and the faculty and students' excitement, it is clear that Messmer was a popular and attractive place for students to enroll and that there was no shortage of applicants. While it is likely that the school's early growth was simply because there were no other coeducational Catholic high schools available, Messmer did offer a wide range of classes that included demanding science classes. Multiple foreign languages were offered and faculty spent their summer breaks in seminars and professional development classes, so Messmer was more than a placeholder for Catholic youth waiting to enter the work force.

It is easier to see the school as a faith-based community, but this is something that one would expect in a religious school, and perhaps even more so from a school that was housed on parish grounds. There were no shortages of religious personnel, artifacts, and services. Because of the number of parishes who sent students to the high school, Messmer could not be seen as a neighborhood school, although the administrators did invite and welcome nearby residents to nearly all of the school's activities.

While the school's home at St. Elizabeth's was temporary, it seems clear Diocesan High School had every intention of being a good neighbor. The sisters sought ways for the school to become a part of the neighborhood through service and goodwill. Service to others was expected of the students of Diocesan High School. For example, the entire student body filled ten "generous" baskets of food for "worthy poor families."

⁹⁷ *Messmer Foursquare* 7, no. 2. November 1933, 1; Volume 7, no. 6, March, 1934, 1.

It is not known how the families were selected or who determined their 'worthiness.' In addition to this, female students participated in an ongoing project that benefited poor families at Christmas. Celestine Schmitt volunteered time to provide free needlework lessons for female students. She spent four hours each week in the school helping the girls create a number of different pieces of baby clothing. The girls then were able to donate the baby outfits they made to the St. Vincent De Paul Society, who distributed them to the poor at Christmas.

The school would probably view its primary contribution to social justice as its service to the poor and certainly in terms of a religious obligation; it would not meet the contemporary standard of activism. There is no evidence that there were any tensions between students for any reason, and perhaps this is due to the school's strong religious orientation. However, there is a clear division of the roles and expectations of the staff. Priests were the only religion instructors and enjoyed significantly greater status than the teaching sisters. By contemporary standards, having nuns live in a single unused classroom is outrageous at best.

The next decades would give the school a permanent location, a long-tenured faculty and administration, and a chance to build upon the foundation that had been built. With this, it becomes easier to see if the early patterns of academic excellence, community, and social justice identified by Bryk, Lee, and Holland develop at Messmer High School.

CHAPTER THREE
FAITH, VIRTUE, KNOWLEDGE

Hail to thee, our Alma Mater
Best in all the land
Silent beacon, guiding tower,
You will always stand.
Faith and honor, virtue, knowledge
These our mottos be,
And to thee, thy sons and daughters
Pledge our loyalty.

In the Twenties, the Church aimed "to make it possible for an American Catholic to carry out almost every activity of life - education, health care, marriage and social life, union membership, retirement and old age care - within a Catholic environment."⁹⁸ By the Thirties and Forties, this goal was clear in schools. The Archdiocese of Milwaukee was less interested in making Messmer a part of the "new social order" called for by George Counts than it was in preserving Catholic ideology and doctrine, and American Catholic school officials were especially attentive to Papal edicts. The Catholic social philosophy held that "external social order can be understood rationally through natural law," and that society is essentially a series of interlocking networks with each level responsible for its immediate members.⁹⁹ Two of the most important networks were the family and the local parish, and Catholic schools were seen as an extension of both. A centralized school like Messmer could serve as an important link in strengthening existing bonds and creating new ones. Beyond this need to build community, Messmer was further united by both the Depression and war.

⁹⁸ Morris, *American Catholic*, 164.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

The years between 1935 and 1947 mark a period of remarkable change for Milwaukee. A manufacturing boom from World War II brought relief from the Depression; the roads, businesses, and parishes closest to Messmer grew, changing what once had been quiet neighborhoods into an emerging industrial and commercial district. Capitol Drive was becoming a major thoroughfare due in part to the location of A.O. Smith, one of America's largest metalworks, less than two miles from Messmer on Capitol Drive.

Finally, in addition to the tremendous increase it triggered in the city's manufacturing industries, World War II spurred significant changes in the lives of all Milwaukeeans. Everyone was expected to contribute to War drives through rationing, fundraising, and other sacrifices. Archdiocesan schools participated in stamp and bond sales, all manner of drives for goods and supplies, and consistently responded to calls for assistance. Messmer faculty and students closely followed its alumni in active duty and solemnly marked each serviceman missing or killed in action. For Messmer, the war added another layer to its already deep faith-based identity, and its students' participation in all manner of extracurricular activities helped further extend its sense of community.

Milwaukee grew rapidly in terms of area, population, and industry. In 1935, the city's population was 583,000 and had grown to 867,400 in 1950.¹⁰⁰ Milwaukee was also fortunate to have a variety of manufacturing industries in the city to employ its citizens. In 1940, between 40-50% of all workers in the city were employed in some form of manufacturing, when the two leading forms of industry were non-electrical machinery

¹⁰⁰ *Milwaukee County City Suburbs Today and Yesterday – A Statistical History of the Community*. "Population, Area, and Population Density Per Square Mile." 100.

and food products.¹⁰¹ In addition to a growing labor force, wages also rose significantly, with hourly pay rates nearly doubling from 1940 to 1950.¹⁰²

Milwaukee's growth and relative prosperity were not without interruption. Although the effects of the Depression arrived somewhat later than in similar cities, the city was not spared completely. From 1933 to 1942, there were 125,715 cases of relief from Federal Works Program, including the CCC, CWA and WPA. The peak of public assistance came in 1935, when 44,768 people were enrolled in city, state, and federal programs. World War II brought an end to most relief beyond regular social security, and by 1943, the number of cases had dropped to 12,526.¹⁰³

Ethnicity and religion were still closely associated, although Milwaukee's population had shifted from immigrants to native-born; by 1940, immigration had slowed significantly; 88% of all citizens had been born in the United States.¹⁰⁴ The neighborhoods immediately surrounding Messmer began to change their ethnic compositions. To the north of the school, the Far North Side district reached from Keefe to Silver Spring between 3rd and 51st and remained largely German. Just to the south of Messmer, between Villard and Keefe, was the Near North Side. This district offered affordable housing located close to the wide variety of local industries. Although this area was also initially German, by World War I, was much more diverse, containing Jews, Bohemians, Dutch, Slovaks, Italians, Hungarians, Greeks, and by World War II, African-Americans.¹⁰⁵ In particular, the neighborhoods now called Harambee,

¹⁰¹ Still, *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, 436.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 574-575

¹⁰⁵ *Discover Milwaukee*. Milwaukee: Department of City Development, 1986.

Riverwest, North Division, and Brewer's Hill were among the specific neighborhoods with the most ethnic and racial residential change.

African Americans remained limited to a very small residential pocket that had expanded somewhat to an area bordered by State and Wright Streets Third and Twelfth Streets.¹⁰⁶ St. Benedict the Moor continued to serve as the primary Catholic church for blacks.¹⁰⁷ From 1930 to 1945, the total African-American population of the city grew from 7,501 to 10,200 – a comparatively small increase among other Northern industrial cities. Much of this can be explained by lingering effects from the Depression.¹⁰⁸ Here, a disproportionate number of black workers were semi- or unskilled laborers, so job shortages were far more severe for Milwaukee's African-Americans. Despite the incredible need for workers during WWII, recovery came very slowly for blacks, especially as they were often treated with hostility from labor unions.¹⁰⁹



Figure 3.1: Messmer in 1939. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

¹⁰⁶ Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁷ Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth*, 317 and 532.

¹⁰⁸ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*; 62, 152.

The two largest religious faiths continued to be Roman Catholic and Lutheran. In 1936, the number of Catholics in the Milwaukee Archdiocese had grown to 175,087 registered members in 63 churches.¹¹⁰ By 1948, the number had grown to 396,560 Catholics in 248 parishes. There were an additional 78 chapels in the area.¹¹¹ The ethnic distribution of Catholics mirrored that of the larger population. Among Catholics, Germans remained the most common ethnicity while Poles had replaced Irish as the second most prevalent group. However, like the Irish, Poles were almost exclusively Catholic.¹¹²

Enrollment in both public and parochial schools began to drop due to a nearly ten percent decline in the birth rate from 1912-1940.¹¹³ In 1935, a total of 144,524, or just over 82% of school age children, were in school. Of these, 85,180 were in public schools; 33,459 in private. In 1940, the total number of students dropped to 130,330 (80,718 public, 31,225 private). The numbers continued to fall in 1945, with the 125,519 enrolled students comprising nearly 81% of the eligible population. Interestingly, while public school enrollment fell to 69,703, private school numbers remained nearly the same with 31,831 students. As the decade ended, public school enrollment continued to fall, more students attended private school each year. In 1950, 119,368, or 86% of school age children were in school. Public schools claimed 66,544; the remaining 36,130 were in private schools.¹¹⁴

The Archdiocese was aware of both of these trends and tried to anticipate the needs of its students. In 1940, they claimed a total of 202 schools in the entire

¹¹⁰ *Milwaukee – A Statistical History of the Community*. 120.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*; 121-122.

¹¹² Steven Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002).

¹¹³ Still, *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, 434.

¹¹⁴ *Milwaukee – A Statistical History of the Community*, 22.

Milwaukee Archdiocese with 1444 teachers, and an enrollment of 51,740 students.¹¹⁵

This number, however, includes rural elementary and high schools, universities and colleges, sisters colleges, schools of nursing, and other specialty institutions located well outside of Milwaukee county; therefore, archdiocesan statistics do not reconcile with census data.¹¹⁶ In 1948, in the entire Archdiocese, there were 20 Catholic high schools for 8293 students.¹¹⁷

While private schools faced the same financial hardships as public schools, Archdiocesan schools may have been better equipped to handle monetary difficulty because money had always been tight and most teachers and administrators were associated with religious orders and were paid substantially less. Debates over curriculum change and educational reform, common in many public school systems, were virtually non-existent in Milwaukee's Catholic schools. The Superintendent of Schools mandated a specific curriculum and it was followed without discussion. Additionally, the Catholic schools were as racially and ethnically segregated as their public counterparts. In 1938, St. Benedict the Moor opened its own high school because "Catholic high schools wouldn't admit black students," even those who has attended St. Benedict's own parish elementary school.¹¹⁸

Like Milwaukee, Messmer continued to experience growth and change of its own, although after its first decade, it settled into stability, consistency, and order. A new principal, the Reverend Joseph Stehling, the pastor of St. Nicholas, greeted students when

¹¹⁵ "Recommendations for the betterment of the work in our schools" Report to Archbishop Samuel Stritch February 20, 1940.

¹¹⁶ *Milwaukee – A Statistical History of the Community*, 22.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹¹⁸ Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth*, 461.

classes resumed in the fall of 1934.¹¹⁹ The official reason given for the change was that Father Goebel would be attending Catholic University for the next year to complete his doctorate. Unofficially, however, it was apparent that Goebel could not remain at the high school. As a priest, he had been accused of a variety of improprieties, including misuse of funds and womanizing. Additionally, while enrolled as a graduate student, he was involved in bitter conflicts with administrators at both Marquette and Georgetown Universities. Archdiocesan officials hoped that the time away would serve to rehabilitate his image and perhaps help him refocus on his duties.¹²⁰

When Goebel stayed at Catholic University for an additional year, the Reverend John M. Voelker was appointed as the new principal while Stehling became Messmer's financial administrator.¹²¹ Upon his return to Milwaukee, Goebel served as a chaplain and later as a member of the diocesan Board of Education. By 1937 he had regained the Archbishop's trust and was named archdiocesan superintendent of schools, where he would remain until the early Seventies. There were no further suggestions of scandal, and he became a respected lecturer on issues of Catholic schooling. Additionally, he served as president of the secondary schools division of the National Catholic Educational Association.

According to the *Foursquare*, although students welcomed Father Voelker warmly, they were shocked by the sudden death of Sister Mary Francis Jerome, one of the original faculty members from the St. Elizabeth site.¹²² Students did not seem to mind the change of principals as much as the loss of a beloved instructor, but they quickly

¹¹⁹ "Messmer High School," Unsigned school history, 1945. Page 6. Messmer High School archives. Box 1.

¹²⁰ Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth*, 453.

¹²¹ Messmer High School *The Capitol*, 1936, 16.

¹²² *Messmer Foursquare* 9, no. 1, 1. 4 October, 1935.

became immersed in the new school year. Enrollment was at 1,015 students, so fifteen parish priests were enlisted to provide religious instruction.

Certainly, Messmer benefited from the continuity of having a principal whose tenure lasted over fifteen years, but Voelker's leadership was given additional support and direction from the Archdiocese. In February 1936, Archbishop Stritch appointed a seven-member board of directors who then drafted a constitution to delineate the board's role. The Archbishop and archdiocesan superintendent served as ex officio members, while the remaining five were elected by pastors of the Milwaukee parishes. The director of the board was a priest chosen by the Archbishop who would also serve as an administrator at the school. The Superior of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) served as vice-director, kept all school records, issued credit, maintained the office, and handled all matters relating to female students. It appears that hers was not a voting membership, despite her close supervision of both teachers and students. The board was charged with eleven responsibilities: accept and discuss monthly reports; make school visits; consider the director's recommendations for "improvement and extension of academic facilities;" review monthly financial reports; recommend or disapprove extraordinary expenses; review annual reports; evaluate admission of students at a tuition rate different from the standard cost; study tuition costs in relation to scholarships offered; determine faculty hires and set their salaries; consider the cost of extracurricular activities (which were to be self-supporting); and hear faculty complaints.¹²³ The thirty-seven points of the constitution were clearly intended to provide guidance, stability, and clear oversight of the school's finances.

¹²³ "Messmer High School Constitution" 8 February, 1935.

Enrollment continued to grow so rapidly that students were ultimately turned away. In September 1937, there were 1056 students. The peak enrollment during Voelker's tenure as principal came between 1943 and 1949, and the school graduated 3984 students during his principalship.¹²⁴ In 1944, Messmer was home to 1,470 students as well as a faculty that included 31 SSND, 6 Brothers of Mary, and 10 lay teachers. Additionally, "Four priests of the diocese are in active service in the school, while thirteen priests of the different parishes help with the instruction in religion."¹²⁵ In January of 1944, the final member of the "Four Fathers," the Reverend Vernon Kuehn, joined the faculty.¹²⁶ This nickname, given to Fathers Riedel, Goebel, Stehling, and Kuehn, referred to the administrative team that was present, in part, for several decades. By 1949, enrollment had been lowered to 1,130, still well over capacity, by offering classes to sophomores, juniors, and seniors only.¹²⁷



Figure 3.2. The Four Fathers. Source Archdiocese of Milwaukee

In the opening years, all Messmer students were white, and most were German. In 1936, the Messmer board noted that there were 403 students of German descent, 133,

¹²⁴ A Few Points of Interest in Messmer's History" 25 year program, 14.

¹²⁵ "Messmer High School." Unsigned School History, 1945, 6.

¹²⁶ *Messmer Foursquare* 17, no. 4. 21 January, 1944.

¹²⁷ *Education in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee*. Annual Reports 1941-1949.

Polish, 101 “American”, 52 German-American, 28 German-Polish, and 17 Bohemian. Because the distinction between "German" and "German-American" is made by the students, it can be assumed that this was still an important issue to them. However, it is not clear what the distinction might be. With monthly attendance ranging between 960 and 1040, several hundred students are not noted in these numbers, but they do reflect the overall pattern of the area.¹²⁸ Messmer had students travel to school from all over the city, but most of the students who lived nearby were of either German or Polish descent. Generally speaking, east of Port Washington Road/5th Street was Polish; west was German.¹²⁹

The stability of both Archdiocesan and school leadership allow for inquiries into the school’s academic policies for a sense of excellence, the existence of any sort of a community, and any evidence of actions or beliefs about social justice.

Academic Excellence

Rising enrollment may suggest a confidence in a school’s ability to provide a quality education, and Messmer’s population steadily increased during Voelker’s tenure. The increase in students also meant a greater need for teaching faculty, and during this time the faculty was almost exclusively religious. The greatest jump in student population occurred in the mid-Forties, and although the growth was not unexpected, it did present many challenges to both Messmer and Archdiocesan officials.

A 1947 report stated that Messmer “values being independent from parishes although overcrowding is the tradeoff,” and overcrowding is definitely a hallmark for this

¹²⁸ Messmer High School Board of Consulters Minutes 20 January, 1936.

¹²⁹ Trotter, 41.

period.¹³⁰ By 1945, Messmer was filled with both students and faculty – at a capacity of 850, there were 1493 students enrolled in two shifts and 375 students were denied admission due to lack of space. On faculty, there were 32 SSND, 4 archdiocesan priests, 8 lay teachers, and six Marian Brothers, added in 1944 to supplement Messmer’s teaching staff.¹³¹ Led by Brother Edward Houston, who also served as a vice principal, they were instructors for boys’ classes only. This association with the Brothers of Mary only lasted a year, and five Franciscan Sisters of Manitowoc filled their absence in 1945. Following these two years, the School Sisters of Notre Dame filled most of the unexpected teaching needs.¹³²

Messmer’s projected enrollment for the 1945-1946 academic year was so large that school administrators were desperate for options to ease the burden on the overcrowded school. The 1125 returning upperclassmen themselves surpassed “normal capacity of the building and equipment by 42 percent,” but there were also 356 freshmen and 124 sophomores who had been admitted as new students. One idea was to offer a regular schedule of classes for sophomores and juniors and have abbreviated days for freshmen and seniors. This almost certainly resulted in numerous academic challenges; when this plan proved to be unsuccessful, Fr. Voelker sought assistance from the priests in nearby parishes.¹³³

By August, a plan was in place. Essentially a modified version of the schedule used the previous year, known as “victory shifts” in the *Foursquare*, that allowed the

¹³⁰ *Report of Catholic High Schools*, Supplement to NCWC Survey. April, 1947.

¹³¹ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald Citizen*. 28 July, 1945. 6.

¹³² “A Few Points in Messmer’s History.” 1952. 15

¹³³ John M. Voelker 19 June, 1945. Letter to parish priests.

1501 students to somehow complete their classwork.¹³⁴ Prior to the opening of school, Voelker sent a letter to each family to explain both the enrollment problem and the school's solution. Incoming freshmen would more than likely begin their time at Messmer at satellite campuses located at one of five parishes: St. Joseph's on the South side; St. Francis at 4th and Brown; St. Boniface at 9th and Teutonia; St. Catherine at 51st and Center; and St. Thomas Aquinas at 35th and Lisbon. Although students were encouraged to select one of these five schools, a few slots were available at St. Robert in Shorewood; St. Leo, at 24th and Chambers; Holy Redeemer at Hampton and 39th; St. Pius XI in Wauwatosa; the Holy Cross school run by the Pallotines on Bluemound, and even at Messmer's first site, St. Elizabeth. In addition to relocating the freshmen, Archbishop Kiley determined that all students would follow an adjusted schedule. Seniors would report from 8:00-12:25, sophomores and juniors from 8:45-3:20, and freshmen from 12:40-4:40. Voelker stressed that freshmen and seniors were not given time off from the school day and insisted that they prepare for all of their classes at home.¹³⁵

Working students were fairly common; a 1936 survey of the alumni association indicated that 26% of female and 29% of male students held jobs.¹³⁶ No further details were available; these figures seem high, especially during the Depression. This rate remained relatively unchanged during this time, as students were never encouraged to seek employment. During the postwar period, Voelker also advised parents to discourage their children from seeking employment on school days as a consideration to returning servicemen and those who had lost their war jobs. Besides, he noted, students should spend a minimum of an hour and a half studying each day, and seniors and freshmen

¹³⁴ *Messmer Foursquare* 18, no. 1.

¹³⁵ John M. Voelker 1 August, 1945. Letter to parents.

¹³⁶ *Messmer Foursquare* 9, no. 8, 1. 5 June, 1936.

should devote three hours of study beyond the ‘regular’ school day.¹³⁷ Certainly, any employment would infringe upon their scholarly obligations.

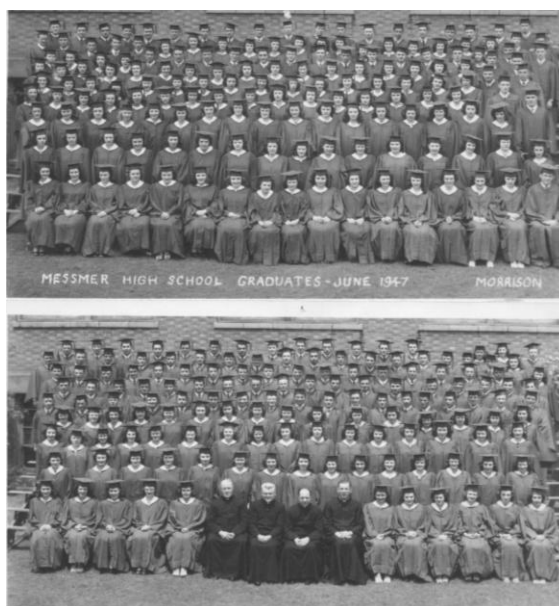


Figure 3.3: Female Graduates, 1947. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

School administrators appeared to be quite concerned with the most effective means of providing a quality program of instruction for their students in both classroom programs and extracurricular activities and expected cooperation from everyone affiliated with Messmer. Parents and students were regularly given behavior guidelines with titles such as “Cooperation” that related beneficial habits of good students while teachers were given templates for syllabus preparation and objectives for Catholic secondary education in America.¹³⁸ In fact, these topics were also themes of the frequent addresses Voelker gave to educators throughout the archdiocese. “Seriousness of Purpose,” “Industry,” “Concern for Others,” “Responsibility,” and “Ability to Think” were among the titles

¹³⁷ John M. Voelker 28 November, 1945. Letter to parents.

¹³⁸ “Messmer Rules, 1940’s.” Archdiocese of Milwaukee, John M. Voelker Collection.

used most often. While these letters and speeches may not have been instructive to anyone, they were offered with striking regularity.

As Archdiocesan superintendent, Goebel seemed to be aware of changes within the schools and noted recommendations from his department of education in his regular memoranda to teachers. In 1940, some of the noteworthy points included continuing psychiatric services for two special classrooms designed for “feeble minded” Catholic children; establishing a teaching supervisor position for each of the nine major orders of school sisters; establishing a department of recreation and directed play, although physical education was not deemed proper for the sisters; and eliminating the department of vocational guidance, with high schools assuming these responsibilities.¹³⁹

Goebel was an advocate of standardized testing and mandated intelligence testing for all third and fifth graders as well as annual reading and vocabulary tests. These results were then compared with other districts, both public and private, from across the country.¹⁴⁰ Although specific data were never released to the public, he did convey in reports to school personnel that scores were “higher” or “lower” than previous years. Additionally, he expressly forbade the testing of parochial students with students in public schools.¹⁴¹ Goebel’s apparent fondness for testing was limited to a specific set of instruments that were administered within his own schools and proctored by SSND. However, Goebel clearly believed his schools could be compared to public schools as he insisted that Archdiocesan schools maintain the 180 day calendar mandated by the state legislature in 1937.¹⁴² He was also insistent on standardized course outlines for all

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 2, Book 1 (1941-1942), 13 August, 1941.

¹⁴¹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 1, Book 1 (1936-1937), 134.

¹⁴² Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 1, Book 2 (1938-1939).

disciplines, uniform textbook adoptions, and testing days for the administration of all standardized tests as well as final examinations.

It is important to acknowledge that the Archdiocese was aware of its shortcomings. In a 1938 report, it was noted that parish schools “wholeheartedly” transferred seventh and eighth grade students to the public school system for vocational training and that over half of all students were overgraded. This was of particular concern because “it is clear that these students particularly are lacking in the fundamental understanding of the minimum essentials.”¹⁴³ This would certainly affect a student in high school if he were expected to perform at a level beyond his capability. Beyond this, grade inflation suggests a systemwide lack of attention to academic excellence; further, the removal of subpar students suggests a lack of adherence to the social justice ideal of providing for all students.

The Archdiocese was very specific in how students with any sort of disability were treated. There were guidelines for students with IQ levels under 85, opportunity rooms “for mentally handicapped/unadjusted children”, screening for hearing and vision difficulties, and special classes for the education of mentally handicapped students at the St. Coletta School for Exceptional Children.¹⁴⁴ While there were occasionally students with visual or hearing impairments at Messmer, there does not appear to have been any services for students with any other sort of disability. In fact, it is unlikely that these students would be welcome in any Catholic secondary school due to a lack of available

¹⁴³ Office for Schools, Child and Youth Ministries, School Report for 1937-1938. 5 August, 1938.

¹⁴⁴ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 2, Book 1 (1941-1942), 13 August, 1941; 5 November, 1941; 15 January, 1943.

programs. By comparison, in 1939-1940 there were 310,000 students enrolled in special education programs nationally, or 1.2% of the entire school age population.¹⁴⁵

The Archdiocese was prepared to spend large amounts money for its schools. Beyond the \$643,000 expense to build the school in the first place, Messmer's 31 classrooms held \$80,000 worth of equipment. Not included in this total were the 9,468 books housed in Messmer's library. Among the 46 full time teachers in 1946, priests were paid \$900 a year plus board; teaching sisters were given housing and \$500 annually. Faculty were also well educated. Of all the full time staff, twenty-eight held bachelor's degrees, another sixteen had master's degrees, and Voelker held a PhD.¹⁴⁶

Within the school itself, there were numerous opportunities for Messmer students to achieve and to be rewarded for their success. While Messmer athletics received a great deal of attention, extracurricular activities were not limited to athletics. In fact, school publications in particular were able to claim Principal Voelker as their most fervent supporter. In 1933, he published an essay celebrating nine reasons, including low cost and high reader interest, why newspapers, annuals, magazines, and yearbooks should be offered in high schools.¹⁴⁷ While he was a strong advocate for all student activities, he was especially devoted to student publications and presented very specific guidelines for creating successful school publishing programs.

¹⁴⁵ National Center for Education Statistics *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait.* (January, 1993) 44.

¹⁴⁶ *Report of Catholic High Schools*, Supplement to NCWC Survey. April, 1947.

¹⁴⁷ Archdiocese of Milwaukee archives MC55 box 2, file 5.



Figure 3.4: Fr. Voelker with Students. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

The *Foursquare* was a common means for Messmer students to learn of the accomplishments of their classmates, teachers, and alumni. Its pages are filled with news of scholarships and occasional modest academic or commercial awards, names of winners from music competitions, and results from interscholastic contests. In fact, the *Foursquare* itself was an award-winner, consistently being rated as a ‘superior’ All-American student publication the National Scholastic Press Association. From a single 1936 issue of the paper, there are articles detailing *Foursquare*’s latest rating; the names of Gregg Award winners for shorthand; the full text of Helen Mae Collentine’s essay that defeated over 19,000 entries to win the Henry L. Dougherty prize, which included an expenses paid trip to Washington to meet the president and five hundred dollars; Irene Kisch’s six-month scholarship to the Wisconsin Commercial Academy; and Val Blatz’ second place finish in a statewide music competition.¹⁴⁸ Messmer used the *Foursquare* to publish the names of students who won awards, earned scholarships, or who made the honor roll. These lists were often quite lengthy, as they included students with both A and B averages. Typically, these lists contained the names of between two or three hundred students.

¹⁴⁸ *Messmer Foursquare* 9, no. 8, 1. 5 June, 1936.

Intramural and interscholastic debate and speech competitions were very popular with Messmer students, and they tended to do well against other schools. For example, in a 1945 competition hosted by Marquette University and moderated by Monsignor Goebel, Messmer's six students who won awards in various competitions helped maintain their reputation as a top local school. Academic competitions were also encouraged between the classes, and students took great pride in their accomplishments. Debates between the homerooms were very popular and highly competitive, especially when underclassmen were able to score an upset over older students.¹⁴⁹

While it is clear that Messmer was popular and well-respected, it is certainly possible that part of this reputation stemmed from the sheer unavailability of coeducational Catholic high school classrooms for parochial school graduates. In 1945 Archbishop Kiley started a \$750,000 building fund for new high schools in the hopes of addressing the urgent need for more space. It is important to note that parishioners throughout Milwaukee responded to the call for help. In three weeks, over \$406,000 of the needed money was raised, and twelve parishes exceeded their quotas.¹⁵⁰ Despite the demand for classes for Catholic students, in 1948 the Divine Savior convent school on 35th and Center began to admit lay students as it prepared to expand to its new location at 100th and Capitol.

Finally, archdiocesan records do not indicate a clear view of their understanding of academic excellence. The board often issued statements such as “curriculum adjustment must be continuous or the school program will become static and

¹⁴⁹ *Messmer Foursquare* 9, no. 3, 1. 20 December, 1935.

¹⁵⁰ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald Citizen*, 28 July 1945, 6.; 18 August 1945, 2.

ineffective.”¹⁵¹ These proclamations would often stand without any explanation or suggestion for the types of adjustments that were sought. Therefore, it is not clear that their curriculum was designed to accomplish anything beyond creating good Catholics as most of the available information about instruction relates to religious instruction. For example, in 1947 twenty percent of Messmer's graduates went on to college. This compares to the national high school graduation rate of 52.6% of seventeen year old students and a 26.9% college enrollment of eighteen to nineteen year olds.¹⁵² The Diocesan board maintained that, “to concentrate on college preparation as a prime objective in high school education is wrong.”¹⁵³ Messmer's lower college enrollment could be explained by greater need for its students to immediately enter the work force rather than an administrative emphasis against college; the courses and facilities offered by the school certainly suggest that college was a reasonable goal for its students.

Community

The notion of ‘school as community’ is much easier to approach, especially in terms of the Bryk, Lee and Holland ideal of “membership in a set of traditions and mores that reflect the group's purpose.”¹⁵⁴ In addition to the neighborhood in which the school was located, there were grade levels, homerooms, athletic teams, academic disciplines, and clubs. There were also racial and cultural “communities,” but one cannot assume these existed simply because there were multiple groups present. As a Catholic school, Messmer did have a foundation of religious similarity for both students and faculty as well as networks that had been formed from the students' home parishes. In addition to

¹⁵¹ Education in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee: Annual Report 1948-1949. 7.

¹⁵² National Center for Education Statistics *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. (January, 1993) 55; US CENSUS, Percentage of the Population 3 Years Old and Over Enrolled in School, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: October 1947 to 2008.

¹⁵³ Education in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee: Annual Report 1948-1949. 7.

¹⁵⁴ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 128.

this, Messmerites strongly identified with the new communities created by their membership in extracurricular activities.

Like nearly every other school, Messmer students were obviously grouped into classes and then into smaller homeroom units. Messmerites, though, were given a great deal of opportunities to maintain these smaller communities through a variety of friendly competitions between other classes and homerooms, and students were as active within their own walls as they were in interscholastic competitions. There must have seemed to be no limit to intellectual and athletic options available for students. One act-play festivals and debates pitted homerooms against each other, while most sports fielded teams from grade levels. Students were encouraged to compete in intramural athletics and competition did not end upon graduation; a highlight of the basketball season was a game between the varsity squad and a team of alumni 'all-stars.'¹⁵⁵

In addition to the one-act plays that were presented each year by individual homerooms, there were an overwhelming number of clubs and activities for students during this period: school officers, student government, *Foursquare*, *The Capitol*, monitors, Catholic Instruction League, orchestra and band, choral club, airplane club, acolytes, cheerleaders, math club, Catholic Students' Mission Crusade, debate, Sodality, library club, German, French, Latin, Spanish, and Polish clubs; stage crew, weaving, dramatics, camera club, radio club, Pan-American club, Braille club; foods, clothing and homemaking clubs; science clubs; art, mechanical drawing, commercial (bookkeeping, shorthand, typing) club; and history club. Based on student activities lists in yearbooks, most students participated in at least two of these activities, and most participated in some fashion for all four years of high school.

¹⁵⁵ *Messmer Foursquare* 9, no. 7, 3. 8 April, 1936.

The Braille Club was unique in that its sole purpose was to transcribe texts for blind students. When it started in the early 1940's, over thirty members were charged with simply learning how to use the Braille typewriters.¹⁵⁶ As students became skilled with the machines, they would help train new members and transcribe material for use throughout the city. On occasion, the club would be visited by a blind person who would either thank the students for their work or present them with a new project.¹⁵⁷

Interscholastic athletics were a tremendous part of Messmer life. Although football and basketball were the most common sports, Messmer fielded teams in almost every sport. Interestingly, the school's various athletic teams did not share the same nickname, even from year to year for the same sport. For example, the basketball teams had several names, including the Avalanche, before they finally became the Blue Wave in 1935. In addition to football and basketball, Messmer was also noted for its hockey and boxing teams. In 1936, the hockey team, wearing brand new cardinal and white sweaters despite their Blue Wave nickname, won the conference with a 13-1 record, and boxing was so popular that the school's tiny gymnasium was packed with 1100 spectators for its intramural boxing tournament.¹⁵⁸ The interest in sports was not limited to male athletes. A regular feature in *The Foursquare*, "Who's Who in Girl's Sports," began in the mid 1930's and detailed the efforts of female athletes in their numerous intramural sports and activities. Obviously, the coverage was not analogous to the boys' sports, which received multiple stories in each issue, but the columns were detailed and balanced among the classes. Other sports open to students included fencing, golf, volleyball, swimming, riding, and tennis. These activities typically associated with higher social

¹⁵⁶ Messmer *Capitol* 1941.

¹⁵⁷ Messmer *Foursquare* 18, no. 6. 23 March, 1945.

¹⁵⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 9, no. 6, 3. 13 March, 1936.

status suggest an interesting demographic at Messmer; working class families typically did not have the access or the funds required to participate in riding, golf, or tennis.

For the most part, the athletic teams were successful. In particular, Messmer boxers were quite good. Boxing was a very popular sport, and the 1942 opening night of the annual show brought in 1200 spectators.¹⁵⁹ The next year drew the same number, and the 1944 matches brought 1500 fans into the tiny gymnasium.¹⁶⁰ By 1949, Messmer had settled on a single team nickname for all sports, the Bishops, and became a fixture in the top of the conference standings. The football team won the Catholic conference with an undefeated season and the basketball team won its third straight conference title.¹⁶¹

In 1937, the school started the M club for lettermen “to bring about a greater respect for the emblems and to unite the athletes more closely”.¹⁶² The club became an honors and a service organization that completed many projects for the school. Later, many of these members would remain associated with the school through the Men for Messmer organization. This group of alumni completed various repair and construction projects for the school during winter and summer breaks. In general, Messmerites tended to remain very interested in the school, even after their graduation. In 1942, over 400 alumni returned to the school for the group’s bimonthly meeting. This would be a healthy turnout under normal circumstances, but it seems especially impressive during wartime, when fuel rationing dramatically limited citizens' mobility.¹⁶³

Students also appeared to be quite curious about ethnic and cultural backgrounds enrolled at Messmer, especially those that extended beyond the familiar similarities of

¹⁵⁹ *Messmer Foursquare* 15, no. 5. 24 February, 1942.

¹⁶⁰ *Messmer Foursquare* 17, no. 7. 11 May, 1944.

¹⁶¹ *Messmer Capitol*, 1949.

¹⁶² *Messmer Foursquare* 10, no. 7, 3. 30 April, 1937.

¹⁶³ *Messmer Foursquare* 16, no. 3. 18 December, 1942.

American-born communities of international descent. Messmer had its first Hawaiian student in 1942, when "refugee" Robert Witten, "an American born in San Francisco" enrolled for the Spring term.¹⁶⁴ During the Thirties and Forties, *The Foursquare* printed the names and nationalities of any "foreign born" students. For example, in 1936, there were fifteen (six German, four Austrian, three Czech, two Canadian, and one Irish) students enrolled.¹⁶⁵ Despite this, there were a number of organizations to celebrate the similar heritage that many students shared. The first such club was Messmer's Polish Students Organization, formed in the spring of 1936. It was an enormously popular club, and its initial meeting drew 200 members.¹⁶⁶ There was not an analogous club for German students (the German, French, and Spanish clubs were for students enrolled in the language classes), so this club might have been a way for Polish students to recreate a bit of their own neighborhood or parish communities.

Messmer's first Asian student, Rose Wong, entered the school in 1947 as a junior and graduated the following year.¹⁶⁷ Most impressive, though, was Cleatus Lyday, an African-American who transferred from Oklahoma as junior and graduated in 1949. While only involved in chorus his junior year, he served as both class officer and student body president in his senior year.¹⁶⁸ Typically, student body presidents had attended Messmer all four years. Lyday was encouraged to enroll at Messmer by his parish priest, who said that in addition to being closer to his home at 1st and Vine, Messmer would be a good fit for him.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ *Messmer Foursquare* 15, no. 6. 1 April, 1942.

¹⁶⁵ *Messmer Foursquare* 10, no. 2, 1. 3 November, 1936.

¹⁶⁶ *Messmer Foursquare* 9, no. 8, 4. 5 June, 1936.

¹⁶⁷ *Messmer Capitol*, 1947, 1948

¹⁶⁸ *Messmer Capitol*, 1949.

¹⁶⁹ Cleatus Lyday, Interview with author, 8 June, 2010.

Students and faculty alike came together during difficult times. Messmer was not immune to unfortunate events, but it tried to note them when they occurred. Sometimes, a current student died suddenly during the school year, as did Sophomore Adeline Wasielewski, who became gravely ill on a Sunday afternoon and had died by Tuesday. Other times, deaths would occur during the summer break. Also in 1936, '36 Graduate Leo Braunreiter, who had won a news writing award the previous spring and Ray Sanders, a '32 grad died over the summer of separate illnesses.¹⁷⁰ During World War II, alumni who were missing or killed in military action were noted with unsettling regularity in the *Foursquare* and despite the increased frequency of such articles as the war progressed, each memorial contained as many details as space would allow.

The deaths of school board members and former teachers were also noted in the *Foursquare*, as students were familiar with these people from their work both in the school and in their home churches. In 1937, *The Capitol* was dedicated to the memory of their first principal, the Rt. Rev. Monsignor Joseph Barbian.

Of great importance to most students and faculty of Messmer was its faith community. School days began with Masses; each student took religion classes; holy days were observed with additional services; and many clubs and organizations were inspired by religious ideals. Most of the faculty lived on site in either the rectory or convent, and the school was filled with religious images and slogans. It was impossible to separate the school from its Church.

From the opening Mass of the school year to the weeklong series graduation events, it was clear to students that school was a prayerful place. Commencement activities were especially religious in nature. Archbishop Stritch often presented

¹⁷⁰ *Messmer Foursquare* 10, no. 1, 1, 4. 6 October, 1936.

graduates with their diplomas, and solemn graduation Masses were celebrated by high-ranking archdiocesan officials, if not by the archbishop himself. As early as 1936, Messmer had begun sending a number of its graduates into the vocations. In 1936 alone, nine male graduates had entered seminary study and three female alumnae had joined convents.¹⁷¹ These numbers would continue to grow through Voelker's tenure.

One of the most popular student organizations was Sodality. The organization, known by the formal names Sodality of our Lady or Children of Mary, "is a religious body which aims at fostering in its members and ardent devotion, reverence, and filial love towards the Blessed Virgin Mary."¹⁷² New members were installed each spring, and usually there were several hundred. The sodalists elected the Queen of the May, whose annual coronation ceremony marked another major event for Messmer students. Perhaps due to the "acute man shortage" that affected prom, the Queen of May celebration was probably second only to graduation in popularity among senior girls. When Beverly Creiten was named Queen in 1944, she was assisted by 80 senior girls and 28 boys of sodality.¹⁷³ Perhaps because of Fr. Reidel's position as director of the Milwaukee Sodalists' organization, SUMA, being named to the sodality club was a major honor for students and each year; new members' names were printed in the *Foursquare*.

It should come as no surprise that students in a Catholic school would spend a great deal of time in prayer, and as news of the world at war became more common, much of the prayer activities focused on peace. All archdiocesan schools observed Peace Day on September 10, 1939, and high schools showed the film "Perpetual Sacrifice." A

¹⁷¹ *Messmer Foursquare* 10, no. 1, 4. 6 October, 1936.

¹⁷² Joseph Hilgers, "Sodality." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 14. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912)

¹⁷³ *Messmer Foursquare* 17, no. 7. 11 May, 1944.

few weeks later, Archbishop Strich asked that schools join “Mothers Mobilizing Against War” after commending the organization for its work toward peace.¹⁷⁴ Once the United States entered the War, however, all messages encouraged support and sacrifice for the troops. Messmer was an active participant in most drives, including Victory Book Campaigns to send books to soldiers.

The war seemed to bring Messmer students together, whether it was because of or in spite of the constant reminders found outside of school. Even celebrations, such as the 1943 prom had a war theme, and alumni were invited to participate.¹⁷⁵ Masses were offered for alumni who were either missing or killed in action and student organizations tried to address the war and its impact in their proceedings. For example, “The Contribution of the Catholic High School Graduate and the Post War World,” was the theme of a career conference hosted by Messmer’s Sodality in 1945.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, the *Foursquare* was used to announce upcoming testing for the military, requests for any needed supplies, and the results of past testing sessions. In the spring of 1943, 88 students wrote qualifying tests for military service.¹⁷⁷

Interestingly, a great deal of the focus given to the war didn’t begin until after the war had officially ended. For example, the 1945 *Capitol*’s cover featured the seal of the United States in the upper right corner of the cover, a “Gold Star Honor Roll” listing the 42 alumni veterans who died in service, and photos of all of the members of the class of 1945 who were in military service.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 1, Book 4 (1939-1940), 5 September, 1939; 18 August, 1939.

¹⁷⁵ *Messmer Foursquare* 16, no. 7. 3 May, 1943.

¹⁷⁶ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald Citizen*. 3 March 1945.

¹⁷⁷ *Messmer Foursquare* 16, no. 6. 2 April, 1943.

¹⁷⁸ *Messmer Capitol* 1945, 12.



Figure 3.5: Gold Star Honor Roll Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Any war drives presented to students were usually framed in terms of moral and spiritual obligations, and sometimes the pressure was quite intense. Older students in particular were expected to participate in defense stamp and bond sales, and sales reports were kept to indicate not only who did participate but also who could.¹⁷⁹ War fundraising was serious business. An August 1944 letter from the War Finance Committee indicates “incomplete reports that have reached us show that our children have purchased stamps and bonds amounting to \$14,966,231.89 during the year.”¹⁸⁰

Messmer typically responded to these drives by setting goals that included both a specific product as well as a dollar amount. For example, in early 1942, the school had raised almost \$6,500 in war bond and stamp sales, but they wanted to raise enough money to purchase 20 propellers for planes used for pilot training.¹⁸¹ From time to time

¹⁷⁹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 2, Folder 2 (10/42-3/43), 2 October, 1942

¹⁸⁰ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 3, File 1 (August-October 1944) 1 August, 1944.

¹⁸¹ *Messmer Foursquare* 15, no. 5. 27 February, 1942.

they would also have more creative drives, such as the September 29 “birthday penny drives” in which each student was encouraged to give a penny for each year of their age or the \$6452.35 the homeroom presidents raised in a project designed to raise money for a Jeep for servicemen.¹⁸² Locally, Goebel also acknowledged the possibility of unmet labor demands and allowed early release and/or moving Easter break for older students who were needed to work on family farms.¹⁸³ Male students were encouraged to apply for positions in breweries or as truck drivers.

After the war ended, Archbishop Kiley directed all teaching sisters to help in “paying tribute to the war dead” on Wednesday, October 22, at 11:00 am, when the first of Milwaukee’s war casualties were expected to arrive by train. Goebel asked that “from 11:00 to 11:01, all school children will rise and face east to pay a minute’s silent tribute. We ask, too, that the children be instructed to spend that minute in silent prayer for our departed war heroes.”¹⁸⁴ Messmer students probably did not need to be reminded of the loss of their own alumni as they had already constructed a memorial of their own in the school’s chapel.

The St. Thomas More Chapel on Messmer’s main floor features prominently in the memories of many alumni. Much of the volunteer work done by alumni groups is related to the chapel, such as the honor roll placed there in 1942. This plaque, which was updated frequently through the war years, initially listed over 300 names of former students who were enlisted in the armed forces.¹⁸⁵ Due to its heavy use and importance to the school, great care was taken to maintain the chapel. After only fifteen years of use,

¹⁸² *Messmer Foursquare* 16, no. 1. 29 September, 1942; Volume 16, no. 5, 3 March, 1943.

¹⁸³ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 2, Folder 2 (10/42-3/43), 8 March, 1943.

¹⁸⁴ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 4, Folder 1 (8/47-3/48), 20 October, 1947.

¹⁸⁵ *Messmer Foursquare* 16, no. 2. 6 November, 1942.

the chapel was renovated and rededicated in a grand ceremony in 1946. The dedication Mass was open to a select group of ticket holders who received invitations from Louis Reidel.¹⁸⁶

The earlier idea of a Catholic community that stood strong against threats to the faith was still present to a certain extent. Anti-Catholic bias was still present, and apparently, Goebel believed in keeping the business of the families in the Archdiocese private. He insisted that private schools were under no obligation to share their registers with anyone. School files were not a part of the public record, he said, and administrators were instructed to deny access to any creditors or bill collectors.¹⁸⁷

Superintendent Goebel was also very sensitive toward popular perception and treatment of Catholics. In addition to providing teachers monthly updates about public health issues, such as mandated citywide shutdowns of all drinking fountains, outdoor relief allotments for school supplies, and examination guidelines, he also encouraged teachers to respond to threats to the faith. For example, he encouraged teachers to stress to their students that the Pentecostal Movement was “an attack on Catholicism.”¹⁸⁸

Messmer students certainly viewed themselves as part of a larger Catholic community. The Society of the Propagation of the Faith, a group intended to support missionary work, claimed 1944 as “the best in its history,” due in large part to the nearly \$1,800 contributed from Messmer in membership dues, donations, special collections, and gifts. This was over \$400 more than St. Pius, which had the second highest amount of contributions. Part of the Society’s projects included the Holy Childhood Association, which was designed “to acquaint the children with the meaning and purpose of the holy

¹⁸⁶ Messmer High School Box 3, Folder 3 Chapel Communication/Dedication Invitation 29 May, 1946.

¹⁸⁷ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 1, Book 2 (1938-1939)

¹⁸⁸ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 1, Book 2 (1938-1939)

childhood but also to keep alive the interest they take in its activity.”¹⁸⁹ It seems that regardless of the cause, if Archdiocesan students were asked to contribute in the name of their faith, Messmer would be among the leading donors.

Messmer also served as an anchor to an extended geographic community. Messmer’s location and size made it an ideal venue for large events held by other schools and outside organizations, and the school was more than happy to serve as host. The annual music festival was the largest production, lasting two days and filled with entries from all archdiocesan schools, and was heavily promoted by Monsignor Goebel. This was such a large scale event that Goebel was able to offer all supervisors, music supervisors, Mothers General, and all teaching sisters in the archdiocese complimentary tickets.¹⁹⁰ In addition to this, the school was home to numerous plays and concerts, broadcasts of the Catholic High School Radio Program, and meetings of all kinds. Whenever there was need, select students were chosen as ushers and crew and encouraged to represent the school as well as possible.

Once Messmer was forced to expand to satellite campuses in the Forties, this “community” became even larger. It was fully reasonable- and common- for students on the South side who had only visited the Capitol Drive location on a few occasions to call themselves Bishops. This geographic dispersal, in addition to alleviating some overcrowding, also served to spread the word about Messmer and likely helped to attract new applicants to the school.

During the early years of the school, Messmer students appeared to identify themselves as Catholic students in a Catholic school. This faith-based identity can be

¹⁸⁹ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald Citizen*. “Report of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith” 24 February, 1945.

¹⁹⁰ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Book 4. 24 October, 1939.

explained by the Church's unified response to Depression and World War II but also to the Americanized Catholic racial and ethnic attitudes. Students and their families were expected to contribute to charity and war drives even beyond their regular civic duties; there was a moral imperative to helping the less fortunate. By the end of World War II American Catholics, for the most part, viewed themselves as such without any further racial or ethnic distinction.

Social Justice

Evidence of the school's attitude toward social justice is somewhat difficult to assess in contemporary terms of students actively and humanely contributing to their community in order to create a better, more equitable society.¹⁹¹ A primary reason for this is that the term itself, as used by Catholics, did not come into common use until the Sixties. More common was an inclination toward a Christian obligation to help the less fortunate. Further, as citizens were immersed in the Depression and World War II, ideas for a more socially just world often were secondary to simple recovery and survival. In modern terms, though, students were certainly aware of the world outside their school, tried to make it better through service to others, and, while reflecting overall society outside the school, their attempts to help others were often clumsy or condescending, especially when compared to modern practices.

Most notably, the wartime pattern of student service to their immediate community and beyond continued. There were two clubs specifically dedicated to service, the Braille Club and the Catholic Students' Mission Crusade (CSMC). In their first rally, over five hundred students pledged their loyalty to the CSMC, "a student organization directed toward mission work," assisting the vocations, and fundraising for

¹⁹¹ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 289.

missions.¹⁹² In 1937, the Mission Committee sold red paper hearts as a fundraiser to “ransom heathen children.” Each heart cost a nickel, and some homeroom sections became so involved with the project that they created imaginary beneficiaries for their efforts. Overall, the project raised fifty dollars.¹⁹³

Students appear to have been proud of their understanding of political events. Features in the *Foursquare* regularly address local and national issues, and when students ‘reelected’ Franklin Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential election, *Foursquare* staff sent a copy of the issue reporting the results to the White House. The next issue featured a letter of thanks from Eleanor Roosevelt, thanking the staff, stating that “The good wishes of the students and their expression of faith in the President are very much appreciated.”¹⁹⁴

In 1937, Dorothy Day met with two juniors, both members of the *Foursquare*, for a short interview at Messmer. The meeting, meant to encourage youngsters to replace any communist leanings with Catholic faith, took place in Fr. Voelker’s office during regular school hours.¹⁹⁵ This must have been a welcome event for the Archdiocese because of Day’s ability to present a religious rejection of socialism, as well as her call for Catholics to make a personal response to calls for charity

Issues relating to gender were almost entirely in line with that of society outside of Messmer. School elections, for example, certainly reflected specific messages about gender roles. Only senior boys were eligible to run for student body president, although

¹⁹² *Messmer Foursquare* 9, no. 2. 6 November, 1935.

¹⁹³ *Messmer Foursquare* 10, no. 5. 26 February, 1937.

¹⁹⁴ *Messmer Foursquare* 10, no. 3, 3. 22 December, 1936.

¹⁹⁵ *Messmer Foursquare* 10, no. 8. 4 June, 1937.

vice president and secretary were available for girls.¹⁹⁶ Similarly, girls' fashion was a topic of frequent debate, and girls were not permitted to wear trousers to school. An archdiocesan bulletin specified that "it is certainly unladylike for girls to wear slacks to school," and under no circumstances, even in summers, were girls permitted to wear shorts into the convents.¹⁹⁷

The School Sisters present an interesting paradox. They were apparently beloved by the students - tradition held that football players serenaded the convent after each game - they taught nearly every subject, and they lived on the school grounds. However, they also were paid significantly less than priests, and despite the tremendous contributions made by female religious staff, the sisters were not permitted to teach religion. These classes were taught exclusively by priests from the diocese, even if their home parishes were not located near Messmer. Additionally, the school sisters were not identified in yearbooks by name until the Thirties; until then they were listed by department or presented in a single group photograph.

Athletics, though, were a bit more progressive. In an announcement in the October *Foursquare*, girls were told about opportunities to earn sports letters. "If your hero won't give you his, show him up and get your own."¹⁹⁸ Further, girls' sports were given regular coverage in both the *Capitol* and the *Foursquare*.

By the Forties, the Archdiocese was beginning to anticipate a need for personnel to address schools that would soon become home to other races. At this time, "race" likely meant African-American, although Latinos were beginning to move to Milwaukee. In 1944, "Paul Phillips, Negro, Catholic, graduate of Marquette University" was named

¹⁹⁶ *Messmer Foursquare* 9, no. 4, 1. 17 January, 1936.

¹⁹⁷ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 3, File 4 (11/45-2/46), 2 December, 1945

¹⁹⁸ *Messmer Foursquare* 14, no. 1. 1 October, 1940.

to the archdiocesan Interracial Relations committee. He had been working with the Urban League in a similar position since 1943.¹⁹⁹ Goebel's NCEA secondary schools division also attempted to address "the Negro problem," to achieve "racial understanding through school problems," and to deal with returning veterans.²⁰⁰

Beyond this, though, race as it is defined in contemporary terms was still very new. Students usually mentioned race in superficial terms such as recounts of visiting priests or nuns discussing missionary work. In student writing, the superficiality was more evident. For example, when a Native American alumnus died in Tunisia, the *Foursquare* noted that John "Red Feather" Goslyn, who had been known for his Indian dances had been killed in action. At Christmas that same year, Messmer students presented a short play about the role of St. Nick to group of children at the Negro Mission.²⁰¹ However, it is entirely possible that the production was a mild attempt at religious conversion, something that had been remarkably unsuccessful in Milwaukee.²⁰²

Messmer and the larger Catholic community would probably support Bryk, Holland, and Lee's notions of a Catholic school's academic excellence, sense of community, and to an extent, ideas of social justice were at least partially present. Messmer was not an elite school; no alumni are famous or noteworthy scholars. The school was extremely overcrowded and the steps taken to accommodate students resulted in a shortened academic day and the elimination of freshmen classes. However, Messmer had a good reputation and a lengthy waiting list. It was able to enroll and graduate

¹⁹⁹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 3, File 3 (Feb-Oct 1945), 8 October, 1945

²⁰⁰ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 3, File 4 (11/45-2/46), 27 December, 1945

²⁰¹ *Messmer Foursquare* 17, nos. 2 and 3.

²⁰² Steven Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002) 627.

thousands of students during this time. Students won national awards, scholarships, and graduates attended colleges, universities, and seminaries.

Certainly, school activities created many smaller communities that helped students define themselves as students, and this is likely true for any high school. At Messmer, the addition of religion helped to solidify this; students participated in prayer, religious clubs, and service organizations in the school, their neighborhoods, and their parishes in addition to the clubs, sports, and activities that could be found in any high school. Messmer was a school, a gathering place for athletes and participants in other extracurricular events, a showcase for performing arts, a home to its teaching faculty, and a host to events for other schools and groups. While it is impossible to know exactly how these people felt about their participation in these activities, the fact that these optional activities were very popular does suggest that students were able to achieve a sense of belonging and community by doing so.

Finally, 'social justice' existed more as a faithfulness to the Catholic ideal of charity towards the poor and celebrating Christian fellowship than as a movement toward racial equality, but it was an important part of both the school's religious instruction and its students' extracurricular activities. Inclusion of students with differences is only partially addressed; while blind students and their guide dogs were welcomed, "retarded" students who did not perform at grade level were isolated in "opportunity rooms." This insensitivity was not limited to academic classes. As superintendent of schools, Goebel directed principals to inform music teachers that "defective singers must not be permitted to sing with the class."²⁰³

²⁰³ Department of Education Records 1937-1972. Box 1, Book 1, 72.

In this, it appears that while elements of the ‘good Catholic school’ are present here, the idealized portrait as described by Bryk, Holland, and Lee is still not fully realized. In the next two decades, the school continues to both approach and retreat from this ideal.

CHAPTER FOUR TENE QUOD HABES

One of the treasured memories most alumni have of the historic seminary at St. Francis is Sodality nights with Monsignor Rainer. His talks to seminarians invariably carried with them a challenge and inspiration.

On the never-to-be forgotten Sunday night before he went home to God, Monsignor Rainer stood at Mary's altar and there in a clear but enfeebled voice said, "Tene quod habes," or simply, "Hold fast to what you have." Most of us have had those last words indelibly impressed on us, and so I pass on the memory.

Privileged to speak to you through the pages of the *Capitol*, I can only hope to emulate that great priest of God and say to you members of Messmer's family, graduating seniors, underclassmen, and alumni, "Tene quod habes."

The mid-century is approaching. If God and our Mother Mary are to remain with Messmer's family as we go on together in the second half of the century, we must hold fast to our Christian principles. They have been taught, nurtured, and exemplified by a self-effacing faculty, your bishops, pastors, parents, and every genuine Messmerite about you. If we continue together, who can successfully stand against us?

Louis Reidel, 1950 *Capitol*

By the end of World War II, Messmer had established itself as a fixture on the North side of Milwaukee. It was a popular school that enjoyed a good reputation for its academics, religiosity, and athletics, and during the Fifties, a period of growth and national stability, the school most closely resembles the ideal school described by Bryk, Lee, and Holland. However, the community surrounding the school, the Catholic church, and the structure of the schools were beginning to change dramatically; by the middle of the Sixties, an initial decline began that would have a significant impact on Messmer in the 1970s and 1980's. White flight, shifting attitudes toward religion, and a dramatic

decrease in teaching sisters would create a major strain on the archdiocese's ability to sustain all of its schools.

By the Fifties, Milwaukee was expanding in multiple directions. There was a significant increase in population, even as city residents began to move to the suburbs. Church historian Charles Morris describes this as “one of the great social upheavals in American history, and it was made possible by the prolonged postwar prosperity.”²⁰⁴ This decade also marked the end of the great Catholic heyday. According to Morris, American Catholicism’s greatest achievement also became its greatest weakness. Initially, the Church provided a protective shield against anti-Catholic and anti-ethnic biases that united Catholics and helped to assimilate immigrant groups in urban areas. “The Church had managed the signal feat of assimilating successive immigrant groups who had arrived with quite different religious histories to a Catholic practice standard that was arguable the highest in the world.”²⁰⁵ However, in the years following World War II, urban parishes began to shrink in size as their parishioners rose into the middle class and left the cities for suburban living. This movement, according to Morris, presented a significant threat to the astonishing solidarity that had been created in urban parishes. This certainly was the case in Milwaukee, which had become a modern industrial city.

The expansion of the suburbs was both driven by and fed an increased demand for cars. Needless to say, there was also an increased need for high-volume roads. In 1948, a city referendum approved a multimillion dollar bond issue for highways and

²⁰⁴ Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997) p. 255.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 257.

construction began in 1952. The first segment of the new highway opened in 1962.²⁰⁶ Road construction and suburbanization contributed to significant changes in the appearance of the city, and neighborhoods were beginning to change.

In 1950, Milwaukee's population was 637,392.²⁰⁷ Housing was at a premium following WWII. Most veterans wanted to own their homes, but available housing in the city was limited. Although Milwaukee County expanded through the annexation of the cities of Glendale, St. Francis, Hales Corners, Bayside, Brown Deer, Oak Creek, Franklin, and Greenfield, the inner core of the city continued to decline.²⁰⁸ There was virtually no new housing construction, and many existing homes were in deplorable condition, making blight clearing a priority of city government. The residents of this core area, almost exclusively African-American, represented 3.4% of the city's population in 1950. In 1960, the overall black population of 62,458 had begun to move to districts north and west from the city's inner core.²⁰⁹ This expansion moved the African American residential area just a few blocks south of Messmer's attendance area. Transition from neighborhood to neighborhood did not go smoothly, and Milwaukee was not immune to the racial riots that other Midwestern cities experienced.

²⁰⁶ Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 331-332.

²⁰⁷ United States Bureau of the Census. *Census of Population 1960. Volume 1, Characteristics of Population*. Table 30 Population of Urban Places in the US and Commonwealth of Puerto Rico 1950 and 1960. p. 1-98.

²⁰⁸ John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999) p. 342.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 358.



Figure 4.1: Aerial View West of Messmer. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Catholicism continued to grow. From 1953-1958, the number of Catholic parishioners in America grew from over 31.4 million to 39.5.²¹⁰ In the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, the Catholic population grew from 457,397 to 567,440 during the same period.²¹¹ This growth came during a time when local leadership was relatively unstable; Milwaukee had three archbishops during the decade. When Archbishop Kiley died in April of 1953, Archbishop George Meyer was installed in September of the same year.²¹² Meyer was replaced by Archbishop Samuel Cousins in 1958.²¹³

The convergence of unprecedented changes in both the Church and American society in the Sixties and early Seventies certainly ended patterns in worship and in schools that had been virtually uninterrupted for generations. For the newly elevated Catholic middle class, the Second Vatican Council's decrees and the emerging civil rights movement offered a compelling new call to action. Catholic schools continued to grow. In 1950, there were 119,368 school aged children in the city of Milwaukee. Of

²¹⁰ Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract 1960*. "Religious Bodies: Church Membership and Sunday Schools, 1926-1958." Washington: US Department of Commerce. 1960.

²¹¹ Steven M. Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism 1945-1960: Seed-time for change," in *Milwaukee Catholicism: Essays on Church and Community*, ed. Steven M. Avella. (Milwaukee: Knights of Columbus. 1991)

²¹² Archdiocese of Milwaukee, *Annual School Reports*. 1952-1953

²¹³ *Ibid.* 1958-1959.

these, 66,544 were in public schools and 36,130 were in private schools.²¹⁴ In the Milwaukee archdiocese, which extended past the metro area, there were 23 high schools and 9,298 students. In 1951, there were 178 elementary schools and 28 high schools.²¹⁵ To address the need for more secondary schools, ground was broken in 1953 for the new Dominican High School, located north of Messmer in Whitefish Bay, and St. Joan Antida High School, an all-girls school on Cass Street, opened the same year.²¹⁶ By 1960, there were 15,113 students in 24 high schools.²¹⁷

The central office was well aware of a general teaching shortage as well as “the drop in the number of qualified Sisters.” In 1955 Goebel enlisted the assistance of parish priests in recruiting anyone interested in teaching.²¹⁸ Of 337 lay teachers surveyed in 1957, 27% had quit teaching in the previous year. An additional 5% transferred to other schools.²¹⁹ By 1957, priests were requested to appeal for lay teachers during the Sunday Masses.²²⁰

Vatican II is the defining moment that revised and reinterpreted nearly every facet of Church life and its willingness to commit to “the process of change” and led to a sudden and controversial loosening of both policy and process. The new policies inspired an “interest in experience-based religious instruction that made religion relevant to the struggles and joys of the human experience.”²²¹ “Almost all current theological

²¹⁴ US Bureau of Census. Census of Population 1960, Characteristics of the Population, Part 51 - Wisconsin.

²¹⁵ Archdiocese of Milwaukee. *Annual School Report 1951-1952*.

²¹⁶ Archdiocese of Milwaukee. *Annual School Report. 1953-1954*.

²¹⁷ Avella. *In the Richness of the Earth*

²¹⁸ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 6, Folder 1. January-August 1955. Letter to priests, 10 May, 1955.

²¹⁹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 6, Folder 4. August 1957-January 1958. Survey of lay teachers. 18 November, 1957.

²²⁰ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 6, Folder 4. August 1957-January 1958. Note to parish priests, 23 August, 1955.

²²¹ Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth*.

controversies can be understood, in one degree or another, as competing glosses on Vatican II.²²² The Council began in 1962 at the request of Pope John XXIII, who called 2,500 bishops to “renew its own institutional life and to involve itself...in the ‘spiritual crisis of the modern world.’”²²³ When the ecumenical council ended in 1965, a total of sixteen documents had been drafted, including a Church constitution, a constitution on the liturgy, a decree on Christian education, and a declaration on Religious freedom.

The Council’s most apparent changes were within the Mass itself, but far more important were new commitments to racial and religious tolerance, social justice, and reconciling an individual’s place in the world around him. For urban Catholic schools, this clearly meant welcoming students of all races. Urban parishes, however, often had different experiences as white Catholics began to move out of the cities and into the suburbs. In the cities themselves, racial conflicts were not uncommon, and Milwaukee was not immune to these problems.

In Milwaukee, Assistant Superintendent of Archdiocesan schools Les Darnieder called the Sixties “a decade of fluctuation” because “the nation's millions have plunged ominously yet relentlessly into a period of immense promise and prosperity on one hand, yet fantastic dissatisfaction, unhappiness and bloodshed on the other.”²²⁴ In Milwaukee, archdiocesan schools were increasingly burdened with dropping enrollments, fewer teaching sisters, and higher costs associated with lay faculty. The 1969-70 high school enrollment was 10,621, which was down from its 1965-66 peak of 12,000.²²⁵

²²² Morris, *American Catholic*, 323.

²²³ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 46.

²²⁴ Rev. Leslie A. Darnieder. "A Decade of Fluctuation in Catholic Education." Department of Education, Archdiocese of Milwaukee. 1 September, 1970.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

Even though the city gained nearly 100,000 new Catholics in the Fifties, the parishes in Messmer's immediate attendance area that had previously retained their white ethnic affiliations began to shift. Typically, "tightly-knit older ethnic enclaves tend to become less compact, allowing for vacancies to be filled by less favored newcomers."²²⁶ In Milwaukee, the German enclaves were among the first to move from the central city outward and then again to the suburbs. Urban parishes welcomed African Americans into their churches and schools, hoping to convert them to Catholicism. However, despite the willingness of black parents to send their children to Catholic schools, most blacks did not convert to Catholicism.²²⁷

Changes in parish membership also affected Catholic schools. While attendance in suburban schools was steady or increased, urban areas began to experience significant declines by late Sixties. Anticipating the decline, after a lengthy review, the archdiocese chose to expand Notre Dame high school in 1961 rather than build a new Catholic high school on the south side.²²⁸ This expansion would not force the archdiocese to support a new school when high school enrollment fell. In 1965, there were 144,524 students attending parochial and public schools.²²⁹ Overall enrollment was declining in the Archdiocesan schools. From 1965-1966, enrollment in elementary schools dropped from 97,398 to 92,957. This decline was explained by: change of address (76%), drop of grade

²²⁶ Mary Delores Rauch, "Impact of Population Changes in the Central Area of Milwaukee Upon Catholic Parochial Schools 1940-1970." (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 1967.) 2.

²²⁷ Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism 1945-1960: Seed-time for change," 163.

²²⁸ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 7, Folder 3. April-November 1961. Unofficial Comparative Study of Catholic Grade and High School Enrollments – South Side.

²²⁹ US Bureau of Census.

level in a school (12%), dissatisfaction (4%), transportation problems (4%), transfers to junior high schools (2%), and out of state moves (1%).²³⁰

In 1968, the Archdiocese decided to close Francis Jordan High School, a boys' school on the northwest side. The official reason was that the school had "inadequate facilities" that could not be replaced. Other schools would be able to absorb the enrollment because there was "no correlation between the residence of the students and the Catholic high school attended." The school was closed after the Archdiocese rejected a plan that would have the school merge with the all-girls Holy Angels high school.²³¹ Despite declining enrollments, the Archdiocese was still in need of teachers and regularly published recruitment letters.²³² The situation was critical for teaching sisters, whose ranks were diminishing due to retirement. In February 1968, Mother Mary Romuald advised Superintendent Goebel that the School Sisters of Saint Francis were in need of additional teachers in almost all of her schools.²³³ By the end of February 1969, 18 schools had closed, forcing 2501 students and 45 teaching sisters to relocate to other schools.²³⁴

Faculty compensation was also a major concern. The archdiocese increased starting salaries for lay faculty in 1960. A new teacher with no experience would receive \$4200. Teaching sisters and priests also received a salary increase. Full time teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels earned \$1000 annually and principals received

²³⁰ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 9, Folder 1. August 1966-February 1967. "Decrease in Enrollment in Elementary Schools Only, Entire Archdiocese of Milwaukee." 4 November, 1966.

²³¹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 9, Folder 5. April-September 1968. Announcement to schools 24 July, 1968.

²³² Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 9, Folder 3. September-December 1967. Minutes, November 1967 Archdiocesan Board of Education Meeting.

²³³ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 9, Folder 4. January-March 1968. Letter to Edmund Goebel from Sr. Mary Romuald, 27 February, 1968.

²³⁴ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 10, Folder 1. February-April 1969. List of School Closings.

\$1500.²³⁵ Because of an increase in the number of lay teachers, the archdiocese needed to craft new policies for its teachers. For example, teachers from the same family were not permitted to work in the same school and male lay teachers were not permitted to teach students below grade 5.²³⁶ By 1965, the salary scale had been increased to an additional \$350 with a \$150 increase for ten years of service.²³⁷ This salary again changed in 1966 when new high school teachers would earn \$4700 and elementary teachers earned \$3750.²³⁸ In 1967, the starting salary was again raised to \$5150 annually, although an additional \$300 was given to heads of family.²³⁹ In 1971-72 starting salaries were \$7500.²⁴⁰ Teaching sisters' salaries were increased to \$2130 in 1968.²⁴¹ This overall increase in both religious and lay was a dramatic increase over previous expenditures that, according to Superintendent Darneider, made significant tuition increases necessary.²⁴² By contrast, teachers in Milwaukee public schools earned between \$5,400 (with a bachelor's degree) to \$8,570 (with a completed master's degree) in 1965 and between \$7,200 and \$11,992 in 1969.²⁴³

²³⁵ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 7, Folder 1. January 1960-August 1960. 6 April, 1960 letter to principals.

²³⁶ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 8, Folder 2. February-August 1964. 18 February, 1964 bulletin.

²³⁷ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 8, Folder 3. September 1964-January 1965. 28 December, 1964 bulletin.

²³⁸ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 8, Folder 4. February-August 1965. Revised Salary Schedule.

²³⁹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 9, Folder 1. August 1966-February 1967. 1967 Salary Schedule.

²⁴⁰ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 10, Folder 3. November 1969-January 1970. 1970-72 Salary Schedule.

²⁴¹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 9, Folder 5. April-September 1968. Minutes, Archdiocese of Milwaukee Board of Education 30 April, 1968 meeting.

²⁴² Rev. Leslie A. Darnieder. "A Decade of Fluctuation in Catholic Education." Department of Education, Archdiocese of Milwaukee. 1 September, 1970.

²⁴³ R. P. Gousha, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1969. p. 21.

Tuition was increased to \$160 per student in 1960. Superintendent Goebel did authorize a family discount for multiple students enrolled in the same school.²⁴⁴ Tuition was raised to \$200 a year in 1966.²⁴⁵ By comparison, the district's cost for each high school student in Milwaukee Public Schools was \$469 in 1965.²⁴⁶ If the per-student cost at Messmer was even close to this, the school's need for additional funds from the archdiocese was significant. By the 1980's the school would be overwhelmed by operating expenses.

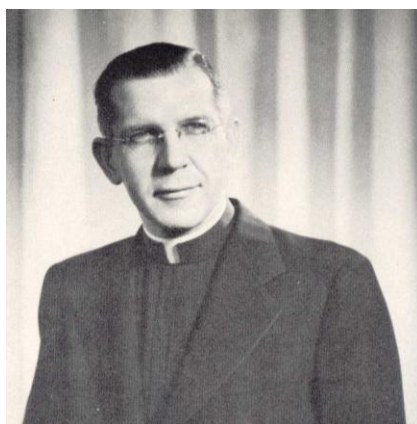


Figure 4.2: Louis Riedel, Principal from 1951-1954 Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Messmer High School opened the 1950 school year with 1169 students, including 354 sophomores, the most in the school's history.²⁴⁷ The term "the four fathers" continued to be popular with students, but Father Voelker's departure for the new Catholic Memorial High School in Waukesha brought a new face to the administrative team. Louis Riedel took over as principal, Joseph Stehling was financial administrator,

²⁴⁴ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 7, Folder 1. January 1960-August 1960. April 8 letter to principals and 7 June, 1960 bulletin.

²⁴⁵ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 8, Folder 6. January-August 1966. 17 January, 1966 bulletin.

²⁴⁶ R. P. Gousha, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1969. p. 28.

²⁴⁷ Messmer *Foursquare* 24, no. 1. 4 September, 1950.

Vernon Kuehn served as athletic director, and Gunther Carroll was director of religion.²⁴⁸

The school celebrated its 25th anniversary with a weeklong jubilee in September 1951.

A highlight of the closing Mass was the reading of the Pope's response to Archbishop Kiley's request for a blessing: "On the occasion of the silver Jubilee of Archbishop Messmer High School, the Holy Father cordially imparts to the faculty and students his Paternal Apostolic Blessing as implored."²⁴⁹

After serving as a principal and financial director for over twenty years, Father Stehling stepped down as principal in 1951.²⁵⁰ He would continue to serve as financial director until his retirement in 1957, when Gunther Carroll assumed that post.²⁵¹ Louis Reidel took over principal duties until 1954, when he was named rector of the St. Francis Minor Seminary.²⁵² His replacement, Vernon Kuehn, would remain as principal until 1968. In 1955, Sister Ernestine, on faculty for twelve years, replaced Sister Marcella as vice principal.²⁵³

Through the decade, enrollment and faculty numbers remained steady. After being eliminated due to overcrowding, freshmen classes returned in 1954 when three homerooms were admitted.²⁵⁴ Students were well over the official capacity, and the School Sisters of Notre Dame kept Messmer supplied with plenty of full time teachers.²⁵⁵ Priests from nearby parishes were still recruited to teach religion classes; it is unclear why there was such a dramatic drop in the number of priests in 1959.

²⁴⁸ Messmer *Capitol*. 1950.

²⁴⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 25, no. 1. 25 September, 1951.

²⁵⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 24, no. 7. March, 1951.

²⁵¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 31, no. 1. 9 October, 1957.

²⁵² Messmer *Foursquare* 28, no. 1. September, 1954.

²⁵³ Messmer *Foursquare* 29, no. 1. 14 October, 1955.

²⁵⁴ Messmer *Capitol*. 1954.

²⁵⁵ Archdiocese of Milwaukee. *Annual School Reports 1950-1960*.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Students</u>	<u>Priests</u>	<u>SSND</u>	<u>Lay faculty</u>
1950-51	1165	14	33	6
1951-52	1152	16	35	5
1952-53	1190	17	34	5
1953-54	1195	15	33	6
1954-55	1206	16	32	7
1955-56	1209	14	32	7
1956-57	1244	14	32	8
1957-58	1234	14	31	9
1958-59	1241	16	30	11
1959-60	1212	5	30	11

Table 4.1: MHS Enrollment and Faculty, 1950-1960. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Certainly, the construction of Interstate 43 had a great impact on the lives of Messmer students. In addition to disruptions caused by the roadwork itself, the new road completely changed the school's campus. Plans had been discussed for years, but the reality of the freeway had not been felt until construction caused an “early evacuation” in the fall of 1958.²⁵⁶ School property had been seized for the road, as well as several streets south of the school that had once been home to African-American students. Additional construction included a 1956 addition to the library that was intended to provide more study space for students, but it also allowed room for considerably more books.²⁵⁷ At Messmer, the Sixties began with a new exterior appearance. The new rectory opened in 1960 and, in addition to serving as a residence for priests, it was also used for a few classes and meetings of clubs such as student council.²⁵⁸ Messmer took its contemporary appearance in 1960 when the Department of Public Works repaired Capitol

²⁵⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 32, no. 1. 1 October, 1958.

²⁵⁷ Messmer *Foursquare*. Volume 30, Issue 2. 12 November, 1956.

²⁵⁸ Messmer *Capitol* 1960.

Drive and opened the bridge over the new Interstate 43.²⁵⁹ The freeway construction continued and in 1961 the Green Bay Avenue underpass was completed.²⁶⁰



Figure 4.3: Messmer in 1963. Source: Messmer Capitol

Despite problems elsewhere, Messmer maintained its high enrollment and the archdiocese was willing to spend for the school; in 1968, Messmer received \$90,000 for improvements that included heating and cooling upgrades and a new gym floor.²⁶¹ The school's library also received 300 books that were purchased with newly acquired Title 2 money.²⁶² The next year, the central office funded summer repairs to the school's main entrance, new desks, and new carpeting.²⁶³ In 1969, the school established a reading center.²⁶⁴

Enrollment continued to rise. In 1961 there were 562 boys and 640 girls.²⁶⁵ This total is well above the 800-850 student capacity that was originally intended for the school. The next year, enrollment was 1205, but there were fewer seniors than the year

²⁵⁹ Messmer *Capitol* 1961.

²⁶⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 34, no. 5. 13 April, 1961.

²⁶¹ Messmer *Foursquare*. Volume 42, Issue 1. 27 November, 1968 and Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 7, Folder 3. April-November 1961. 5 June bulletin.

²⁶² Messmer *Foursquare* 42, no. 4. 20 February, 1969.

²⁶³ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no. 1. September, 1969.

²⁶⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no. 3. 12 December, 1969.

²⁶⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 35, no. 1. 12 October, 1961.

before. Of these students, 1183 were from 49 Milwaukee-area parishes. The majority of the remaining students were from other states, but there were also international students from Germany and Italy.²⁶⁶ In the fall of 1963, there were 1213 students (again more female than male), including 5 sets of twins, one set of triplets, 7 students from Germany, 4 from Italy, one from Colombia and one from the Philippines.²⁶⁷ In 1964, Messmer welcomed 1216 students from 358 families and 37 different schools. There were 124 families with two students enrolled at Messmer, 12 with three.²⁶⁸

By 1969, though, the school was not as crowded as it had been. Messmer's enrollment had dropped to 1076, and was an even lower 975 in 1970-71.²⁶⁹ The 1970 total is likely closer to the school's 'natural' enrollment of students who lived closer to the school. The 1969 numbers were boosted by junior and senior transfers from Francis Jordan High School, which closed the previous spring.²⁷⁰ The school for boys had been located at 67th and Burleigh, so Messmer was the closest Catholic school for most of the displaced students.

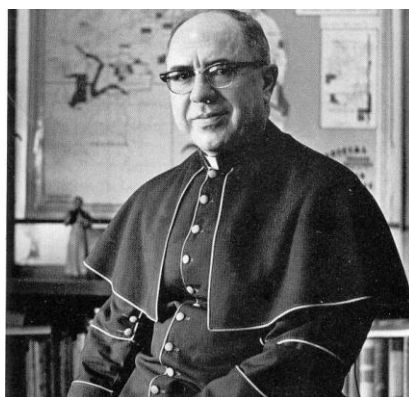


Figure 4.4: Vernon Kuehn, Principal 1955-1967. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

²⁶⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 36, no. 1. 11 October, 1962.

²⁶⁷ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no. 1. 10 October, 1963.

²⁶⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 38, no. 1. 29 September, 1964.

²⁶⁹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 10, Folder 4. February-June 1970.

²⁷⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no. 1. September, 1969.

Messmer began to experience greater faculty turnover between academic years. There was the usual movement, such as the 5 new teaching sisters and two lay teachers that replaced summer transfers in 1963, including Sister Mary Charitas' transfer to Bogotá to teach education in the Pontifical University of Javierana.²⁷¹ In addition to this, though, there was a gradual increase in lay faculty and in faculty of color. For example, there were fourteen lay teachers in 1965 and an African-American religion instructor, Father Robert, OFM.²⁷² The first full-time lay religion instructor, Brian Semmler, was hired in 1968. The teaching sisters were aging and as they retired, they were not replaced with younger SSND.

Enrollment alone does not determine a school's success, although Messmer enjoyed a good reputation and certainly was a popular North side school. Testing the contemporary notions of academic excellence, a sense of community, and social justice during the Fifties and Sixties remains difficult because it unlikely that anyone associated with the school evaluated its success in those terms. To be clear, the lens used here more closely relates to the contemporary understanding, mainly because this is what Bryk, Lee, and Holland used in their analysis. Here, academic excellence is viewed as the extent to which the school and its leadership offers a rigorous (but limited) program of instruction and uniform manner of instruction. Community can be viewed by examining how faculty, students, and alumni seem to have clustered and the extent to which the school nurtures these groups. Most often, this 'community' is viewed as faith-based, but there are many other subsets within the school. Finally, social justice can be viewed by using a

²⁷¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no. 1. 10 October, 1963.

²⁷² Messmer *Capitol*. 1965.

modern social understanding that affirms humanity and dignity to determine the extent to which these ideas were evident in the daily practice of the school.

Academic Excellence

Bryk, Lee and Holland's primary argument in favor of Catholic schools is an "unwavering commitment to an academic program for all students, regardless of background or life expectations, and an academic organization designed to promote this aim."²⁷³ The Archdiocesan central office continued its efforts to streamline its schools and offer uniform courses, but it appears that Superintendent Goebel's primary interest was in administering surveys rather than implementing policy based on their results. For example, a 1950 survey of science teachers indicated that nearly all believed the subject was needed but almost none believed that it was done well.²⁷⁴ There is no further discussion of this survey or of any possible changes or recommendations in Archdiocesan records. Archdiocesan bulletins to schools contained surprisingly little information about the curriculum. Instead, there were items such as the 1951 request made to Sisters to refrain from scaring students about bombings and civil defense plans. Information that does relate to specific classes almost always pertains to religious instruction, but even here, the records do not cite specific texts or practices; rather, guidelines are given for administrative tasks, such as whether failing grades could be issued in religion class for missing daily mass outside of regular classroom activities.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Bryk, Lee, Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 10.

²⁷⁴ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 4, Folder 4 (October 1949-February 1950), 20 February, 1950 Bulletin.

²⁷⁵ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 4, Folder 6. Letter to Sisters Superior from Superintendent Goebel 12 January, 1951.

Yearbooks indicate that, as in the decades before, Messmer continued to offer English, math, science, and language courses from the traditional liberal arts curriculum. However, the school also offered female students 'business arts,' which were essentially secretarial training, and home economics classes.²⁷⁶ This is consistent with Bryk, Lee, and Holland's finding that most Catholic schools required at least four years of English and religion, three years of social studies, and two years each for math, science, and a foreign language.²⁷⁷ Milwaukee Public Schools required two additional years of social studies and an additional year of science. The general track called for two years of math, but additional classes were required "for college bound and the able."²⁷⁸

In 1953, Goebel informed supervisors that lay teachers were expected to meet all state requirements for classroom teachers, although there is no mention of whether religious teaching faculty were expected to have similar qualifications.²⁷⁹ In order to implement new teaching techniques, all teachers were given the opportunity to attend summer workshops for teachers at St. Coletta's Psychological Institute in Jefferson. Contracts for lay teachers were a single page containing spaces for their names, the school, term, salary, the date, and signatures for the teachers and witnesses.

Despite the expectation that they should be involved in numerous extracurricular activities, Messmer students seemed to do quite well in their classes. The Honor Roll for Fall 1950 contained the names of over 300 hundred students, which means that over a quarter of the total enrollment maintained at least an 87 average for B honors and a 93

²⁷⁶ Messmer *Capitol*.

²⁷⁷ Bryk, Lee, and Holland. *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. p. 102-3.

²⁷⁸ *Quality Education in Milwaukee's Future*. New York: The Academy of Educational Development, 1967.

²⁷⁹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 5, Folder 4. February 1953 – December 1953. Letter to Reverend Mothers and Reverend Fathers. 18 May, 1953.

average for A honors.²⁸⁰ This was not an isolated event; over the list averaged over 300 students each term until Fall 1956.²⁸¹ By the end of 1957, there were so many students on the honor roll that the Foursquare could no longer print all students' names. Seniors and scholarship winners were still listed, but other students were limited to being mentioned in phrases such as "196 juniors and underclassmen are on the B honor roll," following the names of all senior and A honor roll recipients.²⁸² While it is clear that many students earned honor roll status, it was not limited to white students. In 1952, there were two African-American students, Angeline Brown and Charles Hill – and both were listed on the honor roll.²⁸³ Until 1961, it was common for 300-350 students listed with A and B honors.

Perhaps as a response to the high number of students receiving honors, school administrators announced changes in the way the awards were calculated. Beginning in 1962, the honor roll would be replaced with "academic honors and achievement" that included average grades of over 90 in at least three subject areas as well as participation in activities.²⁸⁴ Presumably, this would increase the rigor needed to earn honors status.

However, the new formula actually increased the number of students receiving recognition for their work. For the fall 1966 term, 39% of Seniors, 33% of Juniors, 35% of Sophomores, and 14% of Freshmen made the honor roll.²⁸⁵ In the fall of 1967, 383 students were listed on the honor roll. 38% of Seniors, 35% of Juniors, 22% of Sophomores, and 32% of Freshmen earned this distinction.²⁸⁶ Grades lost some

²⁸⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 24, no. 6. February, 1951.

²⁸¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 25, no. 6; 28, no. 5; 29, no. 5; 30, no. 5.

²⁸² Messmer *Foursquare* 31, no. 6. 17 March, 1958.

²⁸³ Messmer *Capitol* 1954.

²⁸⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 34, no.4. 13 February, 1961.

²⁸⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 40, no.3. 17 February, 1967.

²⁸⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no.4. 16 February, 1968.

specificity in 1967 when the Archdiocese moved to letter grades from numbers for recording final grades.²⁸⁷ However, the overall distribution of honor students remained similar. For fall 1968, 41% of Seniors, 29% of Juniors, 25% of Sophomores, and 26% of Freshmen were listed on the honor roll. Also that year, on a trial basis, exam exemptions were reinstated.²⁸⁸ Criteria for these exemptions were not listed. The increased number of honor students does not necessarily mean there was an increase the number of good, capable students, and the high number of seniors might suggest that older students simply learned how to manipulate the system or faculty rewarded seniors simply because they were seniors.

Beyond honor rolls, there were a number of individuals who won other awards. Mark Scobey was named a National Merit Semifinalist in 1955.²⁸⁹ By 1957, 86 seniors sat for the National Merit Exam, and John Davis was named a winner. In addition to his scholarship to Notre Dame, Bruce Weinke received a full scholarship to Dartmouth.²⁹⁰ In 1959, Ronald Smith won an NCTE essay award and Pete Conigliaro was a semifinalist for a Westinghouse scholarship. That same year, fifteen seniors earned full scholarships.²⁹¹

Joan Schaefer was named one of the top 20 math students in Wisconsin in 1961.²⁹² The following year, Schaefer and James Wetzel were named National Merit semifinalists.²⁹³ During the summer of 1961, Sr. Mary Petrine and Sr. Mary Sarah studied math and physics at Seton Hall and Rutgers Universities with National Science

²⁸⁷ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 9, Folder 2. March-August 1967. 7 March, 1967 bulletin.

²⁸⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 42, no.4. 21 February, 1969.

²⁸⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 29, no. 3. 19 December, 1955.

²⁹⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 31, no. 2. 4 November, 1957; No. 8, May 1958.

²⁹¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 32, no. 5. 25 February, 1959.

²⁹² Messmer *Foursquare* 34, no. 5. 13 April, 1961.

²⁹³ Messmer *Foursquare* 36, no.2. 8 November, 1961.

Foundation grants that they won.²⁹⁴ In 1963, seniors Barbara Hauck and Robert Peterson were National Merit semifinalists.²⁹⁵ Also in 1963, Catherine Pompe was named an outstanding English student by the National Council of Teachers of English and was a national runner up for an NCTE achievement award.²⁹⁶ In 1964, Patricia Ryan was a National Merit semifinalist.²⁹⁷ In 1968, Thomas Gust was named a National Merit semifinalist.²⁹⁸

In addition to these academic honors, two students received appointments to United States military academies. In June of 1965, Paul Kesserich received an appointment to West Point.²⁹⁹ Daniel Kaminski received his appointment to the Naval Academy in 1970.³⁰⁰

Individual awards were not always noted in the *Foursquare*, most likely because the number of students enrolled made publishing a full article for each individual's accomplishment virtually impossible. More common was a single article at the end of a semester noting major achievements, such as the article in February 1955 noting the 17 Messmerites who placed in local and national art and essay competitions. Another example was an article recognizing the 58 juniors and seniors who began the 1953-1954 school year with perfect attendance records.³⁰¹

Finally, Messmer did graduate a large number of its students. Between 1955 and 1959, 1,779 seniors received their diplomas. The number of graduates during each of these five years represented about a third of the total enrollment. US Census data

²⁹⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 34, no.6. 15 May, 1961.

²⁹⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no.2. 14 November, 1963.

²⁹⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no.3. 19 December, 1963.

²⁹⁷ Messmer *Foursquare* 38, no.2. 6 November, 1964.

²⁹⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 42, no.1. 27 November, 1968.

²⁹⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 38, no.6. 2 June, 1965.

³⁰⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no.4. 26 February, 1970.

³⁰¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 27, no. 1. September, 1953.

indicates that for Milwaukee in 1960, 54,431 students completed between one and three years of high school and another 66,201 students graduated after four years.³⁰² The median number of years in school was 10.9, so it was not uncommon for students to leave high school without graduating.³⁰³ Nationally, the 1960 graduation rate for seventeen year-olds was 69.5%.³⁰⁴

It appears that many Messmer alumni did choose to attend college. Msgr. Kuehn reported that 40% of Messmer graduates planned to enter college, although "about 80% leave Messmer with the requirements for college."³⁰⁵ In 1960, six graduating seniors received academic scholarships.³⁰⁶ This number must be in addition to scholarships announced elsewhere or does not include partial scholarships, because according to the *Foursquare*, over 60% of graduates, not including those who entered the military or religious orders, attended college. Far more than six should have received scholarships. Of the 375 seniors, 227 enrolled in college in the fall of 1960.³⁰⁷ This number seems high because of the 356 graduates in 1965, 144 enrolled in college the next fall.³⁰⁸ According to NCES data, national graduation rates and college enrollment increased during this time, so it is possible that there was a reporting error in the *Foursquare*. Scholarships won from other classes include 17 full academic scholarships in 1967 and six full scholarships in 1968.³⁰⁹ As before, it is possible that this information is

³⁰² Bureau of the Census. *US Census of Population: 1960*. "Education, Employment Status, and Selected Labor Force Characteristics of the Population for Counties: 1960." Washington: US Government Printing Office. 1963.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ National Center for Education Statistics *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. (January, 1993) 55.

³⁰⁵ Milwaukee *Sentinel*, 25 October, 1965.

³⁰⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 33, no.6. 9 May, 1960.

³⁰⁷ Messmer *Foursquare* 34, no.1. 7 October, 1960.

³⁰⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no.1. 8 October, 1965.

³⁰⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 40, no.6. 2 June, 1967. Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no.5. 22 March, 1968.

incomplete, but one would expect an excellent school with a true liberal arts curriculum to produce a greater number of scholarships.

There is no information about the educational attainment or careers of all graduates, but Kuehn indicated that between 1957 and 1962, 14 graduates earned doctorates, "placing the school in the upper 3% in the nation and the upper 4% in the state."³¹⁰ According to the *Foursquare*, most of the doctorates were earned in science.³¹¹ It is not clear what the percentage represents, but Kuehn's implication was that Messmer was an elite school. While this may not be entirely accurate, it would be fair to say that the science curriculum did provide a rigorous foundation for higher learning.

Interestingly enough, Messmer's own principal did not consistently boast about his school's excellence. In a 1964 interview with the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Msgr. Kuehn said, "Messmer offers a comprehensive program for girls; less so for boys." He went on to describe course offerings, and, in this order, its strong commercial department, the absence of shop classes for boys, four years of English for all students, high and low ability classes, the lack of an athletic field, and a solid basketball program. He concluded with "In the 1930's, Messmer was represented in hockey, and has trophies to show for it... We used to have Polish boys living along the river, where they learned to skate and where they practiced hockey. They were a tough bunch and played a rough game."³¹² These remarks were a poor endorsement at best, especially as he considered the school's commercial programs for girls and basketball team for boys strong academic selling points for the school. Further, this administrative inconsistency could have been problematic if it extended to his comments to faculty and students.

³¹⁰ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 25 October, 1965.

³¹¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no.4. 7 February, 1964.

³¹² *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 23 October, 1965.

Meanwhile, the school was starting to experience considerable turnover among faculty and administrators. It was becoming common for retired teaching sisters to be replaced with lay faculty, and unlike the sisters, lay faculty typically did not remain at Messmer for their entire careers. Vernon Kuehn left the school to fill a pastoral vacancy in 1967; Monsignor Ralph Schmit, who also served as director of the Archdiocesan Sodality Union was named as his replacement.³¹³ In the fall of 1967, Father Esser took over as principal and financial director and Sister Mary Eric was named Vice Principal.³¹⁴ Sr. Mary Eric left this post the following spring when she was selected to manage the Archdiocesan Instructional Television Study.³¹⁵ Father John Aize was named principal in 1970.³¹⁶ The next year, John Rice was named principal.

During the Fifties in particular, Messmer remained very popular and continued to enjoy a good reputation. While not elite, the school graduated a large number of students, there were a few prestigious academic honors, scholarships were earned, and many graduates continued on to college. However, if Messmer was a truly excellent high school in terms of academics, there would be no shortage of honors and awards for its students and faculty. The school and the archdiocese would have showcased their proud and rigorous academic traditions. Additionally, there are few notable alumni to suggest that the school was significantly more than the step between a student's parish school and his entry into what was more than likely the workforce.

³¹³ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 6 May, 1967.

³¹⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no.1. 6 October, 1967.

³¹⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no.6. 24 May, 1968; 42, no.1. 27 November, 1968.

³¹⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 44, no.1. 1 October, 1970.

Community

Bryk, Lee, and Holland's second characteristic of Catholic schools is "a pervasive sense, shared by both teachers and students, of the school as a caring environment and a social organization deliberately structured to advance this."³¹⁷ While there were many opportunities for students to participate in a variety of overlapping academic, faith, and social networks, during the Fifties and Sixties, many of these organizations became less structured and began to orient themselves toward activities outside of the school and the Church. The school probably resembled every other Catholic school during this time; students attended classes, went to Mass, supported their teams at sporting events, and sometimes had part time jobs. School administrators often overreacted to popular culture and took advantage of any opportunity it had to warn students about dangers in society.

After twenty-five years, the notion of a "Messmer family" was becoming real. In 1953, the first children of Messmer alumni enrolled.³¹⁸ As of 1959, Messmer had graduated 5,327 students; 28 became priests; 26 were seminarians; 8 entered orders of Brothers; 78 women entered the convent; 330 entered marriages in which both were MHS alumni; and 56 young men died in WWII.³¹⁹ Additionally, there were several marriages in which both were current or former lay faculty, including James Spitz and Elda Guiliani in 1959.³²⁰

Alumni remained an important and visible part of the Messmer community, and they frequently remained in contact with the school long after graduation. In 1955, former students gathered \$2,650 in contributions to start a scholarship fund for needy

³¹⁷ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, 10.

³¹⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 27, no. 2. October, 1953.

³¹⁹ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald-Citizen*. 22 September, 1951, 6.

³²⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 32, no. 5. 25 February, 1959.

students at Messmer.³²¹ In 1960, five Messmer alumni returned to the school as teachers: Sr. John Dominic, Richard Briere, James Spitz, Bob Neja, and Larry Bossman.³²² In 1965, the class of 1951 started an alumni scholarship fund. In just a few months, they raised over \$11,000.³²³

The Men of Messmer, comprised mostly of alumni but also fathers of students and friends of the school, continued to “supplement the school’s extracurricular activities through financial aid and service” by completing maintenance projects for the school, especially during the summer months. In 1962 alone, their work saved Messmer over \$10,000.³²⁴ In 1963, the group painted, replaced showerheads, and donated equipment such as duplicating machines and 35mm sound projectors.³²⁵ In 1965, the Men retiled the school’s hallways, varnished the gym floor, replaced the boilers, painted homerooms, installed acoustic tiles and purchased 35 full sets of football equipment.³²⁶ Later in the Sixties, they began sponsoring a father-daughter dance.³²⁷

Some of the primary subcommunities at Messmer were the result of grouping students by year of graduating class. Almost all of the school’s competitions, from intramural athletics to talent-based, pitted the classes against each other. Some presentations were reserved for one class, such as the one-act play festivals presented in the spring by the senior homerooms and the separate talent shows presented each year by the junior and sophomore classes.³²⁸ Student deaths were, sadly, not uncommon, but these occasions brought the classes together. When Paul Linnemanston died of polio in

³²¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 29, no. 4. 30 January, 1956.

³²² Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no.4. 26 February, 1970.

³²³ Messmer *Foursquare* 38, no.5. 9 April, 1965.

³²⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 35, no.1. 12 October, 1961.

³²⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no.1. 10 October, 1963.

³²⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no.1. 8 October, 1965.

³²⁷ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no.3. 12 December, 1969.

³²⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 25, nos. 6 and 7.

1953 and Joseph Worzinger died of leukemia in 1957, students pulled together to mourn their friends through prayer, Masses, and private services.³²⁹ The students in each graduating class were especially close. When Don Ochs, a very popular senior, died following surgery at the Mayo Clinic, the entire senior class, over 350 students, was dismissed to attend the funeral Mass.³³⁰

School sponsored clubs, both official and unofficial, were subcommunities that were incredibly important to students. In 1952, there were over 500 member in the 17 clubs offered at Messmer.³³¹ Many of the new organizations that the school added reflected a growing interest in reaching out toward other students. The Pan-American club was added in 1949 and International Students Correspondence made its debut in 1955.³³² A major difference between these clubs and previous missionary projects is that both of these clubs were created so that Messmer students could contact and interact with students around the world. Students were expected to make friends rather than save 'heathens.' Students were also encouraged to look beyond even international borders. When technology advanced to the point that space exploration went from possible to probable, Messmer added a new "space club." The Radio-Rocket club was developed for students with an interest in aviation, flight, and the possibility of space travel.³³³

Some of the new clubs engaged in competition, such as Fidelis Forensics, which sent 26 students to an area meet in 1953.³³⁴ The Canterbury English Club, added in 1957, was more of a social organization. The most social of all was the smoker's club, which cannot be justified in any academic sense, added in 1958 for the benefit of boys who

³²⁹ Messmer *Capitol*. 1953; Messmer *Foursquare* 30, no. 4. January, 1957.

³³⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 27, no. 7. 9 April, 1954.

³³¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 26, no. 2. October, 1952.

³³² Messmer *Capitol*. 1954, 1957.

³³³ Messmer *Foursquare* 31, no. 3. January, 1958.

³³⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 26, no. 6. 25 April, 1953.

enjoyed sharing an occasional cigarette. Messmer also regarded major theatrical productions such as school plays and the fall and spring musicals as clubs since considerable time was devoted to rehearsals and performances.

The Braille club was the best example of a group that blended social activities with projects that were intended to benefit those in need. As a community-wide event, the girls in the club completed a Christmas card project in 1950.³³⁵ Sometimes, students were able to complete books for Messmer students. In 1954, a major project was the transcription of a second year Latin textbook for one of their classmates, Marilyn Unruh.³³⁶ In 1961 they transcribed another Latin textbook.³³⁷ Their work was not all academic or charitable, however; on one occasion athletic director Robert Regent used the club to help him send Christmas wishes to his referee friends...in Braille.³³⁸ Almost all of the club's transcription work took place on Friday afternoons, and the club took "no credit or payment of any kind." Because the coding machines were so expensive, each of the students used a special stylus to punch holes into individual pages by hand. Once finished, the books were proofread and given to schools or retreat houses.³³⁹

Academic clubs and classes still represented a major community within the school. Some of the new clubs added include a photography club introduced in 1964.³⁴⁰ Also in 1964, the school added Future Teachers of America.³⁴¹ Another new club was Koinonia, a "brotherhood in action" club. It seems that this club replaced Sodality in crowning the Queen of the May and in 1970 began coordinating the spring honors

³³⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 24, no. 4. 25 February, 1953.

³³⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 31, no. 1. 7 October, 1957.

³³⁷ Messmer *Capitol* 1967.

³³⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 30, no. 4. January, 1957.

³³⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*. 16 May, 1965.

³⁴⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no. 4. February 7, 1964.

³⁴¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 38, no. 2. 16 November, 1964.

assemblies. In a change from the daytime assembly, though, Koinonia instead coordinated a twilight vigil.³⁴² This is certainly in keeping with formality and solemnity that were associated with Sodality programs.

Many of the clubs featured travel as a highlight of the organization. For example, nine Messmer ‘Crusaders’ attended the Catholic Students Mission Crusade national conference in 1964. However, it was also becoming more common for Messmer students to participate in larger organizations as well. Messmer had a quality music program, and many students participated in the Milwaukee Continental Youth Band. The school was proud to report that twelve students in Band would travel to the World’s Fair in Canada.³⁴³ in 1965, the eight Messmer members of the Milwaukee Continental Youth Band toured Europe.³⁴⁴

Sports provided another opportunity for students to come together, both as athletes and as spectators. Competition in the Catholic conference was fierce and Messmer maintained healthy rivalries with other schools. There were a number of available sports for boys’ intramural and interscholastic athletics, including boxing, golf, swimming, diving, volleyball, softball, tennis, bowling; life guards. Ping pong was added in 1952. For girls, options included square dance, tumbling, bowling, tennis, golf, basketball, water ballet, and “play day.” In December of 1959, 38 girls started Messmer’s first drill team.³⁴⁵

Messmer students continued to rally around their sports teams, and the Sixties were a good time for the school's teams in most interscholastic sports. In fact, they were

³⁴² Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no. 6. 21 May, 1970.

³⁴³ Messmer *Foursquare* 38, no. 1. 29 September, 1964.

³⁴⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no. 1. 8 October, 1965.

³⁴⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 32, no. 3. 17 December, 1958.

able to sustain a reputation as a sports school based on some significant successes during this period, even though most teams were not at all competitive in subsequent decades.

The football teams rebounded from their dismal records in the Fifties. The 8-2 finish in 1963 was the best since 1947 and earned the team third place in the conference.³⁴⁶ There were occasional events that put the importance of having a winning record put into perspective. For example, the team experienced a significant loss in 1964, when football coach Michael Barrington died in a car accident.³⁴⁷ While not dominant in their conference, the Bishops were once again competitive and proud to have multiple opportunities to deliver the “traditional victory serenade in front of the sisters’ house.”³⁴⁸ Even later in the decade, the school still maintained its fierce rivalry with Marquette; the schools typically challenged each other for the top place in the Catholic Conference.

Basketball, on the other hand, yielded much greater success. The Bishops won their conference in 1964.³⁴⁹ Advancing again to the 1966 state tournament, Messmer won its first state basketball championship.³⁵⁰ The following year, the team again advanced to the state tournament and lost the championship match by a single point.³⁵¹ The basketball team won its second state title in 1968, bringing Coach Neja’s three year record to an impressive 66-9.³⁵²

Messmer’s track teams were also quite good. In 1964, Ken Gordecki set a state track and field record in broad jump and school records in both low and high hurdles.³⁵³

³⁴⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no. 2. 14 November, 1963.

³⁴⁷ Messmer *Foursquare* 38, no. 1. 29 September, 1964.

³⁴⁸ Messmer *Capitol* 1964.

³⁴⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no. 5. 25 March, 1964.

³⁵⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no. 4. 11 March, 1966.

³⁵¹ Messmer *Capitol*, 1968.

³⁵² Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no. 5. 22 March, 1968.

³⁵³ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no. 6. 26 May, 1964.

The next year, he broke all of these records.³⁵⁴ Although the team finished second in the Catholic conference in 1966, the track team brought its school a second state championship in less than three months.³⁵⁵ The school started its first cross-country track team in 1965.³⁵⁶ These teams also did quite well and frequently placed among the top ten teams in the state. That Messmer was able to field competitive teams and advance deep into state championship tournaments was not insignificant. Even though the school was a member of the state association of private schools, it was placed in a tough metropolitan Milwaukee conference with Marquette High School and Pius XI, schools that also had strong athletics programs.

Messmer's love of sports wasn't all serious competition. There were plenty of silly contests, such as the 1970 donkey basketball challenge. The gym was filled to watch a match between the lettermen and school faculty. Typically, students vs. teachers challenges were popular events, but this one was even more special because the entire game was played with members of both teams riding on donkeys.³⁵⁷

Ethnic and racial subcommunities in the school were less clearly defined. By the Fifties, the nationalistic celebration of ethnic communities of origin was of less concern than in previous decades; the idea of race was becoming more commonplace. This is almost certainly due to the emerging civil rights movement as well as the Church's calls for racial equality. However, foreign born students, such as Sieglinda Muellelei, who transferred to Messmer from Vienna, Austria, were of great interest to students.³⁵⁸ In 1956, the *Foursquare* published an article detailing the views of 9 foreign students

³⁵⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 38, no. 6. 2 June, 1965.

³⁵⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no. 6. 2 June, 1966.

³⁵⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no. 1. 8 October, 1965.

³⁵⁷ Messmer *Capitol*. 1970.

³⁵⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 29, no. 2. November, 1955.

enrolled. (Frank Nonn, Joe Kirsch, and Maggie Scherer were from Yugoslavia; Rosemarie Nosper, Anneleise Fritz, Gertrude Fritz, Ursula Fritz, Erwin Hoffmann and Adam Kreiber were from Germany.)³⁵⁹ Just a year later, there were eighteen foreign students, including the Fritz sisters, who arrived from Holstein, Germany just six years earlier, each from a separate concentration camp. The students' reasons for attending Messmer were not detailed. Most of these students were German; however, there were also students from Yugoslavia and Latvia.³⁶⁰ Similarly, the 23 international students enrolled in 1960 were also noted in the school newspaper.

The majority of Messmer's white students still had German and Polish surnames, although Italian surnames became much more common in Sixties. It is difficult to say with certainty how many students of color were enrolled at Messmer because there are no available records that specify students' races. The numbers listed below are approximates based upon yearbooks and school newspapers. Between 1965 and 1970, there were a few Latino and Asian students; after 1970, these numbers increased but not as dramatically as the African-American enrollment.³⁶¹ This difference can be explained by the increase of black students in Messmer's attendance area; Asian and Latino families typically resided on the south side of Milwaukee.

³⁵⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 30, no. 2. 12 November, 1956.

³⁶⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 31, no. 2. 4 November, 1957.

³⁶¹ Messmer *Capitol* 1960-1975. Because totals were not kept of ethnic identities, these numbers are approximate, based on class photographs.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Asian</u>	<u>Latino</u>
1960	4	0	
1961	7	0	
1962	n/a	0	
1963	n/a	0	
1964	n/a	0	
1965	26	1	1
1966	30	1	1
1967	31	1	0
1968	35	3	0
1969	47	n/a	0

Table 4.2: Approximate Enrollment of Students of Color. Source: Messmer Capitol

African-American students became a permanent part of Messmer's racial composition in 1952, when two students enrolled and they appear to have been valued participants in school activities. All of the black students were members of clubs and athletic teams; most also joined academic clubs and served in student government as well. Often, they were among the most active students in entire graduating class. In 1954, Charles Hill served as president of the entire student body. During his three years at Messmer, he also made the honor roll, was a homeroom treasurer each year, served as a student council representative, was CSMC treasurer, and was on the *Foursquare* staff. Additionally, all three years Charles played saxophone in the orchestra and band, was an acolyte, a monitor, and lettered in varsity football.³⁶² Patricia Pyant, enrolled in 1954 and was also very active and belonged to the Braille, Pan-American, Chemistry, and

³⁶² Messmer *Capitol* 1954.

Canterbury English clubs. She was a Senior Leader, played basketball, volleyball, and bowled. She also sang with the chorus all three years.³⁶³

It appears that students of color were accepted into the school family as they enrolled; there is no evidence that any of these students was isolated or prevented from participating in any activity. However, it is important to note that there is also no evidence that this acceptance extended beyond school grounds and that black students were as welcome in the homes, parishes, and social networks that were located away from Messmer.

Religious activities were still a very big part of Messmer's community, and many new events were introduced to bring a religious tone to previously secular events. For example, a major event for students that began during the Fifties was the annual ceremony in which the principal blessed the juniors' class rings. The rings would arrive in mid-December, so the blessing ceremony was usually scheduled just before the Christmas vacation.

Daily masses were still offered, all Holy Days Of Obligation were observed, and special occasions were always noted with prayer. Depending on the season of the liturgical calendar, additional services or activities were added. For example, Thirteen Hours devotions were common in December. Outside of school, students were still expected to attend Mass and their home parishes were listed prominently in yearbooks and student directories. Retreats become very important and were first noted in yearbooks in 1949. The theme for the 1950 retreat was "Will Messmerites be for Christ or Marx, with the Pope or Stalin?"³⁶⁴ This certainly reflects a desire to strengthen

³⁶³ Messmer *Capitol* 1957.

³⁶⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 24, no. 1. 4 September, 1950.

students' belief in the Church's ability to protect Catholics from evil and adversity in whatever forms they took.

Religious clubs included the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), Young Christian Students, Sodality, and Catholic Students Mission Crusade (CSMC). Sodality was still incredibly popular with students, both for the activities it sponsored, such as the annual Lourdes Ball, as well as those it participated in, such as the Wisconsin Catholic Action Conferences.³⁶⁵ WCAC events was sponsored by SUMA, the Sodality Union of the Milwaukee Archdiocese, which was led by Louis Riedel, so a large Messmer delegation would not be unexpected. In fact, Riedel himself initiated the annual Conferences so that young Catholics from all over the state could gather to hear inspirational speakers, learn about social issues, and create their own productions to encourage faithful and active members to inspire their home parishes and communities.³⁶⁶

However, while there was a tremendous interest in activities, a bit of the focus on grand ceremony seemed to be diminished. For example, when Archbishop Moses Kiley died in April 1953, Goebel decided not to suspend school for his funeral Mass. Sisters were instructed to lead students in offering a rosary or a litany during the time of the Mass.³⁶⁷ Welcoming a new archbishop was a different story. Students were excused from classed for the "enthronement" of Archbishop William Cousins, and all students were encouraged to offer Mass and Communion for him. For the first time, students would be able to watch the ceremonies on television; WTMJ broadcast the event.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 29, no. 4. 30 January, 1956.

³⁶⁶ Avella, *In the Richness of the Earth*.

³⁶⁷ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 5, Folder 4. February 1953-December 1953. 16 April, 1953 Bulletin.

³⁶⁸ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 6, Folder 6. November 1958-August 1959. 16 January, 1959 Bulletin.

Although America was at peace, the sacrifices made during World War II remained fresh for Messmer students, due in part to Fr. Reidel's efforts. He started a thick, leather-bound scrapbook and placed it in the St. Thomas More chapel. After the handwritten title page, each page contained four or five index cards, one for each serviceman who entered his name, graduating class, branch of service, address, and area of deployment. Later, visiting priests or sisters signed the book with words of thanks to the alumni who served. The journal spanned from March 1930 to February 1951, and the final entry contains the signatures of all of the Von Trapp Family Singers.³⁶⁹ In addition to this scrapbook, there was also a photo album filled with service photographs of alumni. In addition to the typed index of all of their names, there was also a list of alumni who were killed in action. This handwritten list, compiled in many different colors of ink by many different authors, is a sobering companion to the permanent chapel memorial "dedicated to all WWII dead Messmerites." The memorial was redecorated in 1953, and the expense was covered, as a gift, by Josten and Company.³⁷⁰



Figure 4.5: Messmer Chapel. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

³⁶⁹ Messmer High School archives. *Messmer's War Boys World War II*. March 2, 1930 - February 1, 1951.

³⁷⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 26, no. 7. January, 1953

Religion remained quite important to Messmerites in the early Sixties. After Msgr. George Meyer's death in early 1963, the school offered a tribute mass to honor one of their founders, who, among other things, never missed a graduation ceremony.³⁷¹ That same spring, the school received a chalice that had belonged to Archbishop Messmer.³⁷²

While religion itself was still important, the expression of religion in the school definitely changed. Daily Mass was no longer compulsory beginning in the fall of 1962.³⁷³ Mandatory Friday Mass attendance was eliminated in 1967.³⁷⁴ These changes had to have been significant, especially since most Catholic schools relied heavily on routine and ritual. However, students seemed to be reluctant to discuss what these changes meant – even a 1967 editorial about the “New Mass” in 1967 does not describe whether the changes are good or bad!³⁷⁵

Mandatory Confraternity of Christian Doctrine classes were introduced in 1964.³⁷⁶ CCD was designed to introduce young Catholics to Church doctrine and prepare them to practice the faith as adults. Perhaps the creation of this class was to familiarize the increasing numbers of non-Catholic students with the Mass and possibly even to prepare them for conversion. Three of the major religious clubs, Young Christian Students, CCD, and Catholic Students Mission Crusade, were still quite active, and the school added a liturgy committee in 1969 as a club option.³⁷⁷ However, Sodality was virtually non-existent by the end of the Sixties, probably due to a decreased devotion to Mary and an increased interest expressing fellowship with others.

³⁷¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 36, no. 5. 4 April, 1963.

³⁷² Messmer *Foursquare* .36, no. 6. 24 May, 1963.

³⁷³ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 7, Folder 2. September 1960-March 1961. 11 October, 1960 bulletin.

³⁷⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no. 2. 22 November, 1967.

³⁷⁵ Messmer *Foursquare*. 17 March, 1967.

³⁷⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no. 4. 7 February, 1964.

³⁷⁷ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no. 1. September, 1969.

Overnight retreats remained very popular. Male and female seniors always went to separate locations. In 1967, the male students went to a retreat center in Illinois and female students made their retreat at Holy Hill.³⁷⁸ In 1970, Messmer and St. Joseph merged senior retreats.³⁷⁹ This is interesting because in addition to being a spiritual event, the retreats were also designed to allow classes to bond with each other. It is possible that this was done for financial reasons, but even as late as 1969, seniors were still taking the class trip to Washington, DC, so money for trips was available.³⁸⁰

In the past, Christmas and Easter presented ample opportunity for the school to have faith-focused activities as well as celebrate major holidays. The chorus usually performed in holiday events, such as tree lightings and visitations to local hospitals.³⁸¹ For Christmas in 1965, volunteers from the senior class served as “Santa’s elves” and provided written responses to children’s letters to Santa.³⁸² This event was so popular with students that it was repeated the following year.³⁸³ Other classes prepared Christmas baskets for families at St. Benedict and Blessed Virgin of Pompeii.³⁸⁴

By Christmas of 1969, it seemed that the holiday was no longer the high holy event that had once encompassed the entire month. There were still a number of activities, but the holiday was beginning to take a secular tone and many of the activities were charities that could have taken place at any time throughout the year. In addition to offering Christmas greetings to everyone, the *Foursquare* wished Mr. Anhalt a happy

³⁷⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 40, no. 4. 17 March, 1967.

³⁷⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 44, no. 1. 1 October, 1970.

³⁸⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 42, no. 5. April, 1969.

³⁸¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 35, no. 3. 14 December, 1962.

³⁸² Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no. 3. 22 December, 1965.

³⁸³ Messmer *Foursquare* 40, no. 2. 15 December, 1966.

³⁸⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 40, no. 2. 15 December, 1966.

Chanukah, students participated in a Christmas letter drive to servicemen in Vietnam, and the Future Teachers of America began tutoring students at Holy Angels parish.³⁸⁵

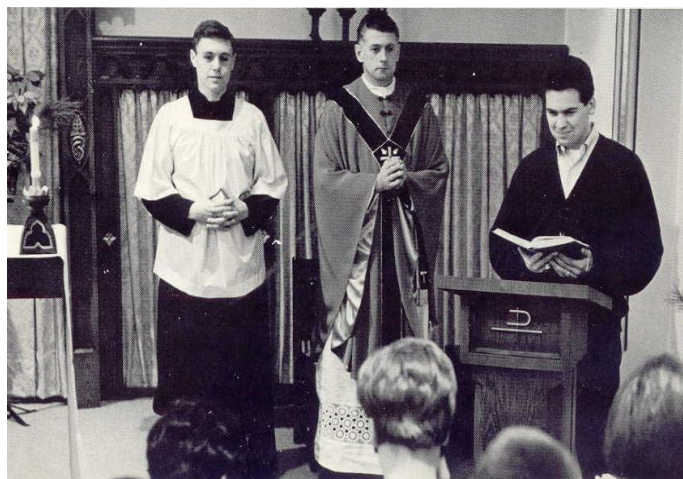


Figure 4.6: Post Vatican II Mass, 1967. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

However, most regarded religion as the most important factor in choosing to attend Messmer. The 1970 *Foursquare* presented a survey to students and parents, and 45% of parents and 78% of students responded to the question, “What is the chief and most important reason you have for sending your child/children to Messmer?” 44% chose Catholic education and/or the religious and moral background; 19% preferred the “high standards at Messmer;” 12% selected “good discipline;” 10% indicated that Messmer was the student’s choice; 9% chose the atmosphere and spirit of Messmer, and only 6% preferred the school’s academic program.³⁸⁶

Some communities were created when students interested in politics became involved in political campaigns. Other students participated in major political events. For example, Carol Grobe and Deanna Schindler were screened for two days so that they could serve in the Democratic Reception committee for Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 visit (to

³⁸⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no. 3. 12 December, 1969.

³⁸⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no. 4. 26 February, 1970.

Milwaukee).³⁸⁷ Students throughout the archdiocese were dismissed to greet the Presidential motorcade or hear Johnson's address in Kosciusko Park.³⁸⁸ Sometimes, politicians came to the school; Mayor Meier crashed the Halloween Hop dance in the fall of 1963.³⁸⁹

Drug use became a popular concern in the mid-Sixties and the *Foursquare* often had editorials condemning their use. Students were no longer permitted to smoke in schools after 1964, and Messmer lost its official smokers' club.³⁹⁰ Almost certainly, an unofficial smokers' club still existed and conducted regular and informal meetings in restrooms and behind trees. A May 1966 assembly was titled "The Effects of Booze, Dope, and Weeds," and the clear intent of the program was to discourage student use of alcohol, narcotics, and tobacco.³⁹¹ Beyond this, there appears to be no evidence of any more than a modest counterculture at Messmer indicated by a few mildly political articles such as "Freedom Revolution Confronts Society" and samples of student artwork and poetry called "Impressions" that were featured in the *Foursquare*.³⁹²

War, even before the military was fully engaged in the Vietnam conflict, was never far from the minds of Messmer students. In 1966, Mrs. Rosemarie Parkinson, a 1938 alumna and mother of freshman Patrick Parkinson, donated a new flag to the school. The flag had been draped over her World War II veteran husband's casket.³⁹³ The high level of World War II patriotism had been replaced with an overwhelming fear

³⁸⁷ Messmer *Foursquare* 38, no.2. 16 November, 1964.

³⁸⁸ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 8, Folder 3. September 1964-January 1965. 28 October, 1964 bulletin.

³⁸⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no.2. 14 November, 1963.

³⁹⁰ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 8, Folder 2. February-August 1964. 2 February, 1964 bulletin.

³⁹¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no.5. 22 April, 1966.

³⁹² Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no.4. 16 February, 1968.

³⁹³ Messmer *Foursquare* 40, no.2. 15 December, 1966.

of communism, despite –or perhaps because- of the new period of relative peace.³⁹⁴ However, war was not fully out of students' minds, and in December of 1952, students were asked to write letters to soldiers in Korea.³⁹⁵ In 1957, Milwaukee opened a War Memorial complex that included an art gallery, veterans' center, and music hall.³⁹⁶ The War Memorial was especially popular at Messmer, and students often voted to hold the junior-senior prom there.

Discussions about war were revived in the mid sixties and a poll in the *Foursquare* yielded mixed results. These students were not as supportive of the idea of war as Messmerites had been in the Forties, although when asked if college students should be drafted, 22% said no, 56% said yes, and 22% thought that “it depends.”³⁹⁷ Another poll the following year later indicated that an overwhelming majority of students were opposed to war.³⁹⁸ This may not be contradictory; students could certainly be opposed to a war but support their duty to serve if drafted. Less easy to explain are the 1968 editorials in which Tom Polyak and Vicki Vieaux argued that bombings could bring “a peaceful end” to war.³⁹⁹

Messmerites were able to get information about the war from a familiar face; Lance Corporal Joseph Jacobs, a 1967 graduate, agreed to serve as a war correspondent from Vietnam.⁴⁰⁰ The first casualty of the latest war came in early 1970, when Jim Hackett, a 1968 alumnus, died in Vietnam.⁴⁰¹ Interestingly, Messmer held its greatest social event, the prom, at the War Memorial in 1965 and 1967-1970. Certainly, students

³⁹⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 24, no. 5. 31 January, 1951.

³⁹⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 26, no. 4. December, 1952

³⁹⁶ Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 318; 350.

³⁹⁷ Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no.5. 22 April, 1966.

³⁹⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no.3. 22 December, 1967.

³⁹⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 42, no.3. December, 1968.

⁴⁰⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 42, no.4. 20 February, 1969.

⁴⁰¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no.4. February 26, 1970.

were conflicted about Vietnam, but there were still deep feelings of patriotism and reverence for the sacrifices made during World War II.

Students were no longer content to sit quietly and passively. In 1969, letters to the *Foursquare* editors lamented several flaws within the school, including the lack of unity among students, a low school election turnout, low participation in homecoming events, poor manners, and generally called for a more positive school image.⁴⁰² Perhaps as a response to these letters, later editorials criticized the lack of homecoming coverage in the school paper.⁴⁰³ Students apparently were becoming comfortable challenging authority and assuming power in student government positions that in the past had been largely symbolic. In the fall of 1969, Student Council president James Callahan stated, “I will not tolerate student groups ‘going over our heads’ to administration directly,” whenever students had concerns.⁴⁰⁴ Instead, Callahan preferred to follow parliamentary procedure, formalize concerns, and meet with faculty on behalf of the entire student body to discuss issues such as grooming standards.⁴⁰⁵ Student editorials in 1970 openly criticized teachers for favoritism.⁴⁰⁶

Finally, the school continued to serve as a host for a variety of events in the community outside the school, although almost all of the events during this time were related to Archdiocesan affiliations. For example, Messmer continued to serve as host for the annual Archdiocesan Music Festival and was often used as a central location for students from all schools to practice.⁴⁰⁷ Additionally, it was a popular site to host

⁴⁰² Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no. 2. 6 November, 1969.

⁴⁰³ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no.3. 12 December, 1969.

⁴⁰⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no.1. September, 1969.

⁴⁰⁵ *The Mouth*, no 4, November, 1969.

⁴⁰⁶ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no.5. 24 March, 1970.

⁴⁰⁷ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 7, Folder 1. January 1960-August 1960. 29 February, 1960 bulletin.

inservice meetings for Archdiocesan teachers, such as the math teachers' annual meeting in 1962.⁴⁰⁸ The school hosted the Wisconsin Catholic Action Convention in December of 1965.⁴⁰⁹ Delta Sigma Theta sorority used Messmer's auditorium to present their 1969 fundraiser show.⁴¹⁰

The most common use of Messmer's facilities by the end of the sixties was for its own student productions. Plays and concerts were always open to the public, and in 1969, Messmer hosted a fine arts festival in which student work from the art, foreign languages, English, and music departments were showcased.⁴¹¹ These festivals became an annual event, usually in the spring, that were well-attended by students, their families, and nearby residents.

In terms of a the Bryk, Lee, and Holland ideal of community, Messmer certainly had elements of communal organization, especially in the areas of shared organizational beliefs and a shared set of activities. The curriculum was certainly a contributing factor, but the largest focal point remained religious activities, both in required attendance in Masses and in optional participation in clubs and service organizations. This, in addition to the students' involvement in and support of athletics, likely sustained the idea that Messmerites, like students in other Catholic schools, were members of a nurturing community.

During the Sixties, most people appeared to think that Messmer was still a community of faith and that religion was the most important community within the school. However, this strong Catholic presence was changing. Many Catholics had

⁴⁰⁸ Messmer *Foursquare* 35, no. 1. 12 October, 1962.

⁴⁰⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no. 3. 22 December, 1965.

⁴¹⁰ *Milwaukee Journal*, 18 March, 1969.

⁴¹¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no. 4. 26 February, 1970.

already left the city for the suburbs, and changing neighborhoods meant that it was no longer certain that students in the surrounding neighborhoods were Catholic. Fewer than half of parents and students stated that religion was a factor in choosing the school, something that had just a few decades been of much greater importance. Additionally, when the Church moved toward a more interactive and less ritualized Mass, it changed traditions that tied people together through habits that had been repeated for generations both in schools and in churches. This is also consistent with social trends that moved away from the collective and toward the individual, especially in the early Seventies. During this time, the Catholic community at Messmer became smaller and less vocal than in decades past.

Social Justice

The final characteristic of a contemporary Catholic high school, according to Bryk, Lee, and Holland is “an inspirational ideology that directs institutional action toward social justice in an ecumenical and multicultural world.”⁴¹² In terms of the Church's attitudes toward the poor during the Fifties and Sixties, it is not clear that "social justice" had fully replaced "charity." In other areas, though, changes were beginning to emerge. Ethnic communities were becoming less important to Catholics; race began to emerge as an issue. In Milwaukee, as in other cities, white Catholics struggled with not only their own attitudes toward race but also “the prospect of Blacks in their churches and schools.”⁴¹³ In 1952, the *Catholic Herald* attempted to showcase the Archdiocese's forward thinking with a profile of Father Herman Porter, one of 36 African-American priests ordained at St. John's Cathedral in the Sacred Heart Fathers Community in 1947.

⁴¹² Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 10.

⁴¹³ Avella, “Milwaukee Catholicism 1945-1960: Seed-time for change.”

He taught religion and English at a seminary in rural Indiana and said that in addition to not experiencing discrimination, he also “participates fully” in the all-white parishes.⁴¹⁴ However, it is as difficult to imagine that the archdiocese or Porter would report anything other than this as it is to envision a completely discrimination-free experience.

It is tempting to make joyful statements about emerging racial tolerance and harmony because Messmer’s ‘progressive’ student body elected an African American student body president. However, despite signs that might suggest racial tolerance, Messmer’s 1950 spring musical was “The Sassafras Minstrels,” which featured 26 students in blackface. Even without the use of blackface, the extreme and offensive stereotypes found in minstrel shows seems to be an incredibly poor choice of entertainment in an educational setting.

Nonetheless, the school seems to have made some progress toward actual acceptance of minority students, and some of the steps mark the first time something like that was done. Students were cautioned against stereotyping as part of 1953’s Brotherhood Week activities. An announcement in the *Foursquare* marks one of the first mentions in that publication of race in terms of anything other than nationality.⁴¹⁵

In 1956, musician Charles King performed for students and his “dynamic appeal and magnificent voice made for an unforgettable assembly.”⁴¹⁶ While the appearance itself isn’t especially groundbreaking, he was mentioned as a “highlight of the school year” in the yearbook. This marked the first time one of the opening pages of the yearbook mentions anyone other than religious staff.

⁴¹⁴ *Milwaukee Catholic Herald-Citizen*, 2 February, 1952.

⁴¹⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 26, no. 5. January, 1953.

⁴¹⁶ Messmer *Capitol* 1956.

During the Sixties, social justice, for Catholics, begins to refer to issues related to race, gender, and social class. However, the most common interpretation was almost always race. Vatican II changed the way many Catholics saw the world around them and encouraged them to work toward making a difference for others. This message was certainly inspiring to the young Catholics who were also moved to action by the civil rights movement. According to John McGreevey, “first on the list for renewed scrutiny were the connections between American Catholicism and the African-American community.”⁴¹⁷ This is due largely to young Catholics being fascinated by “the Southern civil rights movement, especially the sit-ins and freedom rides of 1960 and 1961.”⁴¹⁸ Interracial action committees designed to create awareness and equality were common and were notable because the call for activism was directed at all citizens, not just a single race. This was certainly the case at Messmer, where students were eager to take part in Milwaukee's movement.

Messmer was beginning to integrate, and school administrators appeared to be very sensitive to the need for creating a welcoming environment and encouraged speakers and clubs that would allow students to work together. For instance, Fr. James Groppi, a local, and later, national Civil Rights activist, directed a senior class retreat in 1963.⁴¹⁹ A SUMA presentation on the vocations in 1964 drew a capacity crowd; a featured speaker was author John Griffin on the “true cause of the Negro,” explaining Jim Crow laws.⁴²⁰ This address certainly had little to do with encouraging students to join religious orders. Even though Messmer had been conducting events for some time before this, all

⁴¹⁷ McGreevey, *Parish Boundaries*, 162.

⁴¹⁸ McGreevey, *Parish Boundaries*, 160.

⁴¹⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 36, no. 4. 4 April, 1963.

⁴²⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 37, no. 5. 25 March, 1964.

archdiocesan schools were required to observe Negro History Week beginning in 1965.⁴²¹

The speaker for the 1968 “Negro Heritage Festival” at St. Michael’s was Capuchin Brother Booker Ashe.⁴²² Ashe was an important figure at Messmer who figured prominently in the efforts to keep the school open in the next decade.

Within the school, Sister Martin de Porres began Messmer’s Interracial Action club in 1964.⁴²³ The club was a service organization that often worked with younger students. In December of 1964, the Interracial Action Club began providing tutors for “the Negro parishes of St. Francis and St. Boniface.” On Wednesdays, thirty students would spend 45 minutes at St. Francis and on Thursdays, twenty students would go to St. Boniface to help younger students at the parish schools.⁴²⁴ While the intentions of the club were good, this tutoring might have sent unintended negative messages about the perceived ability of the students, especially since most of the tutors were white. The 1966 Interracial Action Club theme was ‘unification of the races.’⁴²⁵ The club was very popular with both girls and white students, and did not have its first male member until 1966. In 1968, *all* members of the club were white.⁴²⁶

⁴²¹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 8, Folder 3. September 1964-January 1965. 13 January, 1965 bulletin.

⁴²² Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 9, Folder 4. January-March 1968. Festival program.

⁴²³ Messmer *Capitol*. 1964.

⁴²⁴ Messmer *Foursquare*. Volume 38, no. 3. December 21, 1964.

⁴²⁵ Messmer *Foursquare*. Volume 40, no. 2. December 15, 1966.

⁴²⁶ Messmer *Capitol*. 1966, 1968.



Figure 4.7: Interracial Action Club, 1969. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Perhaps inspired by Messmer's Interracial Action Committee, in 1967 the Archdiocese started an "intercultural exchange program" among the parish schools.⁴²⁷ The Department of Education also created an Inner City Curriculum Committee for Sts. Benedict, Boniface, Elizabeth, Francis, Gall, Leo, Michael, John's Cathedral, Gesu, and Holy Trinity.⁴²⁸

While the school appeared to sustain the area immediately surrounding its grounds, students, for the most part, did not live nearby. In the Fifties, White students came from many different Northside parishes; African-American students came from three parishes: St Francis, St Joseph, and St. Boniface. Additionally, most of the black students lived within a few blocks of each other. During 1960-1965, most black students lived and worshipped in the St. Boniface, St. Francis, or Holy Angels parishes. By 1965-1970, the parishes attended by black students expanded to include St. Benedict, St. Elizabeth, St. Agnes, and St. Leo.

⁴²⁷ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 9, Folder 2. March-August 1967. 28 March, 1967 bulletin.

⁴²⁸ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 8, Folder 5. September-December 1965. Board of Education minutes, 18 November, 1965 meeting.

Student attitudes toward race and religion were definitely changing. Movie reviews and editorials in the *Foursquare* following the highly controversial 1968 premiere of “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” were very supportive of interracial relationships.⁴²⁹ Additionally, the May 1968 issue of the *Foursquare* featured a lengthy article expressing extreme sadness over the assassination of MLK.⁴³⁰ Interestingly, there is no mention whatsoever in any of the *Foursquares* about the presidency or assassination of President Kennedy, an enormously popular figure with Catholics.



Figure 4.8 Formal Dance. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Boys and girls were still expected to follow the traditional gender roles. All home economics clubs and classes were reserved for girls. Professional clubs for girls like the Future Secretary’s Club were typically related to office work. The Library Club was almost always a girls’ club, and it wasn’t until 1959 that boys became regular participants. The first TWIRP (The woman is requested to pay) dance was held in 1952.⁴³¹ Despite this reversal of roles, modesty remained a major theme for Sodalists. In

⁴²⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no. 5. 22 March, 1968.

⁴³⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no. 6. 24 May, 1968.

⁴³¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 25, no. 9. June, 1951.

1956 there was an entire “Modesty Program” sponsored by the group.⁴³² These messages were delivered almost exclusively to female students; little, if any, direction was offered to the boys.

In school publications, the SSND were apparently regarded as less significant than male teachers or lay female faculty. In 1951-53 editions of the *Capitol*, the Four Fathers, religion instructors, coaches, and lay faculty were all given photos and captions in the faculty section of the yearbook. The teaching sisters’ names are simply listed, without photographs, on a single page. In 1954, the Sisters had their subjects added to the list of names. The next two years, the sisters were given a double page spread that they shared with religion instructors. In 1957, each Sister was listed by name, subject taught and included in a group picture of all in their religious apparel, although lay women faculty were given individual photos. This changed in 1958, when all faculty were listed by department, although Vice Principal Sister Mary Ernestine did receive her own page. However, this may have been more of a reflection of trends in yearbooks than a true acknowledgement of the teaching sisters.

Each year until 1968, when enrollment began to drop, there were one or two homerooms comprised entirely of female students. Only one homeroom was reserved for boys, and this only happened in 1955. Since the all-girls homerooms were usually sophomore room 302 and junior room 50, this may have simply been a reflection of the organizational preferences of the two teachers rather than any statement about the girls themselves requiring separation from the boys. Further, there were not enrollment imbalances of a magnitude that would require girls-only homerooms.

⁴³² Messmer *Foursquare* 29, no. 8. 27 April, 1956.

For teaching sisters, gender issues were becoming more apparent. According to McGreevey, “American nuns encountered these new currents at a particularly opportune time, since the Vatican command for a mandatory ‘renewal’ of all religious orders coincided with the rush to participate in the civil rights movement.”⁴³³ Activist nuns were quick to draw parallels between themselves and African-Americans in urban settings, especially in terms of segregation, condescension, and exclusion. For example, in 1963, Dr. Goebel sent a letter to all Reverend Mothers announcing that teaching sisters would no longer be permitted to teach “marriage” courses and priests alone would be responsible for this instruction.⁴³⁴

In 1963, the teaching sisters were given new habits for the first time since 1833.⁴³⁵ The next wardrobe change came just a few years later, in 1969. The SSND were still required to wear habits; however, they were given new choices, which included small fashion advances such as shorter veils.⁴³⁶ In both cases, students were quite pleased with the changes and applauded the more modern looks. At Messmer, the sisters were somewhat less anonymous. The earlier practice of not listing teaching sisters by name or by photo had ended by the mid 1960s. In 1965, for example, all faculty were listed alphabetically.⁴³⁷

⁴³³ McGreevey, *Parish Boundaries*, 219

⁴³⁴ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 7, Folder 6. December 1962-August 1963. March 26, 1963 High School bulletin.

⁴³⁵ Messmer *Foursquare*. Volume 36, no. 4. April 4, 1963.

⁴³⁶ Messmer *Foursquare*. Volume 42, no. 5. April, 1969.

⁴³⁷ Messmer *Capitol*. 1965.

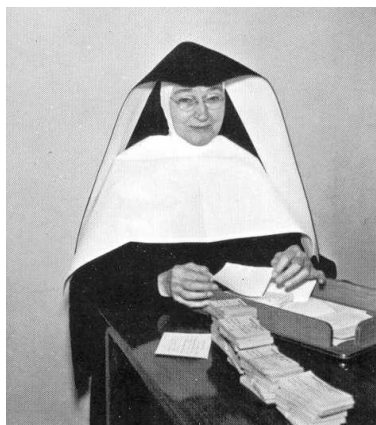


Figure 4.9: Sr. Mary Genevieve in pre-Vatican II Habit. Source: Archdiocese of Milwaukee

For students, there were also a number of gender divisions. As late as 1963, engaged girls were not allowed to wear their engagement rings during school hours.⁴³⁸ After previously being offered exclusively to boys, in 1967, the school began to offer lifeguard training for girls.⁴³⁹ The same year, there were a few co-ed sections of physical education.⁴⁴⁰ The school was far from being fully gender-neutral, though. Girls' athletics were profiled regularly in 1968, but in very small columns titled, "Messmer Misses."⁴⁴¹

There was an initial move toward coeducational 'free time.' In November of 1965, boys and girls were permitted to share tables during lunch periods.⁴⁴² After a brief absence, TWIRP dances returned in 1966. Admission for the dance was 75 cents plus ten cents for each foot of the couples' waists.⁴⁴³

Messmer, despite its lack of any sort of special services for students, appeared to at least try to be inclusive of some students with specific disabilities. Perhaps due to the

⁴³⁸ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 7, Folder 6. December 1962-August 1963. 26 March, 1963 High School bulletin.

⁴³⁹ Messmer *Foursquare* 41, no. 3. 22 December, 1967.

⁴⁴⁰ Messmer *Capitol*, 1967.

⁴⁴¹ Messmer *Foursquare* 42, no. 4. 20 February, 1969.

⁴⁴² Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no. 2. 11 November, 1965.

⁴⁴³ Messmer *Foursquare* 39, no. 4. 11 March, 1966.

success of the Braille club, the school did welcome several blind students and their guide dogs. In 1952, John Schuch completed his initial training with "Franz," a Seeing Eye dog, and was given the German Shepherd to train with him in his home. Franz then accompanied John to all of his classes beginning in 1953.⁴⁴⁴ In the fall of 1956, a group of Milwaukee police officers from the seventh precinct presented Marilyn Unruh with a Braille watch. The Seeing Eye dogs were popular with students, and Marilyn's dog Rocket created a great deal of speculation about his own religion. Later that year, students questioned the religion of her Seeing Eye dog because he was often 'restless at Mass.'⁴⁴⁵

Other disabled students likely faced a much different experience, although the Archdiocese appears to have been aware of the need for special instruction. For example, there was an annual Institute for the Slow Learner conference offered at Marquette University so that teachers could have "A day of help for the retarded."⁴⁴⁶ Additionally, periodically, Goebel sent questionnaires to his principals regarding the numbers and progress of slow learners. In the fall of 1957, Goebel commissioned a series of surveys to determine the numbers of "handicapped" students in the schools. Of particular interest were students who had conditions such as "post-polio," cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, and mental retardation. Later, he also sought information about students with "severe speech problems."⁴⁴⁷ By 1958, the Office of Schools was developing a plan for special education in Catholic schools.⁴⁴⁸ Finally, Goebel sponsored lectures to help teachers attend to students' special needs; Seymour Sarason addressed teachers on

⁴⁴⁴ Messmer *Foursquare* 26, no. 2. October, 1952.

⁴⁴⁵ Messmer *Foursquare* 30, no. 4. January, 1957.

⁴⁴⁶ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 5, Folder 6. April-December 1954.

⁴⁴⁷ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 6, Folder 4. August 1957-January 1958. Survey of Handicapped Students, August 30, 1957; Letter to principals, 25 October, 1957.

⁴⁴⁸ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 6, Folder 5. February-October 1955. 12 June, 1958.

“Aspects of Arrested Development Growth Among Children” in 1959.⁴⁴⁹ While the terminology used to describe students with cognitive disabilities does not match contemporary tones of acceptance and inclusion, it is consistent with the language commonly used. Further, the archdiocese was trying to raise awareness and competency in its teachers. However, programs simply were not in place. Milwaukee Public Schools, by contrast, offered extensive services. In 1950 special education programs included Special B (for 'backward' students), Special C (physical handicaps), services for corrective speech, cardiac needs, sight saving, and home and hospital visitation. In 1969, programs included blind and sight saving, deaf and hard of hearing, reading, Special B and C, orthopedic, educable retarded, trainable retarded, emotionally disturbed, specific learning disability, in-migrant, and home and hospital visitation.⁴⁵⁰

While areas in which a school is academically excellent, sustains a sense of community, or is socially just may be readily apparent, it often is difficult to determine how it might fail in these areas. A possible point of entry for all three might be in the area of inclusion and exclusion, especially since a major criticism of private schools is their ability to enroll and expel students as they wish rather than enrolling all who seek admission. While the following example does not relate to Messmer specifically, it certainly was subject to the policies that were created and applied. By 1950, Superintendent Goebel was the recipient of numerous complaints from public school

⁴⁴⁹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 6, Folder 6. November 1958-August 1959.

⁴⁵⁰ W.W. Thiesen. Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent's Report, 1950. p. 43; R.P. Gousha. Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent's Report, 1969. p. 10.

officials regarding transfer students who had been suspended or expelled before their cases were cleared.⁴⁵¹

In May of 1950, school staff were instructed to advise sixteen year old students who were not earning academic credits to “enroll in a vocational school.” In June of the same year, teachers were informed that high school students earning less than two credits annually could simply be dropped from the official rosters.⁴⁵² Perhaps as a response to complaints from MPS, by 1957 Goebel advised principals to limit the suspension and expulsion of students as well as to reduce overall failures through use of adjustment programs.⁴⁵³ By 1959, no high school student could be expelled without prior notice to the Department of Education.⁴⁵⁴ Certainly, a school's ability to simply dismiss students at will has tremendous implications on both academic excellence and social justice.

"Underperforming" students are much more likely to belong to underrepresented groups and not only did the archdiocese not have any mechanism to serve these students, it also readily sent them elsewhere, where they could, essentially, serve as someone else's problem.

Despite the failure to address the needs of exceptional students, at this point, Messmer's sense of social justice begins to bear a resemblance to Bryk, Lee, and Holland's definition. There appears to be less of a missionary approach toward others - and certainly less of an interest in "saving" those who were different or less fortunate. However, there does not appear to be a consistent recognition of the inherent worth of

⁴⁵¹ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 4, Folder 5 (March-September 1950), March 6, 1950 Bulletin.

⁴⁵² Minutes, Archdiocesan Department of Education Staff Meeting 29 May, 1950 and 6 June, 1950.

⁴⁵³ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 6, Folder 1. Letter to Principals 8 April, 1957.

⁴⁵⁴ Department of Education Records 1937-1972, Box 6, Folder 6. November 1958-August 1959. 19 March, 1959 High school Bulletin.

every person and the school's Catholic governance is at the very least problematic in terms of expressing gender equity.

The school's academic offerings, while not as prestigious as Marquette High School or Pius XI, prepared students for coursework beyond high school. The school's community was its strongest asset and the multiple clubs, sports, and activities available to students make the school seem like an exciting and vibrant place to study and play.

Although the Civil Rights movement and Vatican II changes began during this time, it does appear that residential and cultural changes were already beginning to occur in the neighborhoods, churches, and schools in Milwaukee. For Messmer, the combination of road construction, and the migration of city residents from the parish-centered ethnic urban districts to the middle-class suburbs would only intensify the tremendous changes that were to come from the Civil Rights movement and Vatican II changes in Church policy.

CHAPTER FIVE

KING IN YOUR KINGDOM OR SHEPHERD TO YOUR FLOCK?

“...MESSMER HIGH SCHOOL IS THE ONLY Catholic, co-educational, fully integrated high school in the Milwaukee area. There is a unique spirit among the families that come together to form the MESSMER FAMILY. They are people committed to support a school which fosters Catholic ideals and prepares students to be responsible caring citizens, the leaders of tomorrow.

We have been asking, through our attorney, for a meeting with you, our committee representatives and our financial consultants. We propose now to buy or lease the Messmer building from the Archdiocese. We want MESSMER HIGH SCHOOL to survive. We feel it can survive as an independent Catholic High School in the Archdiocese. We are willing to struggle now, knowing our program would continue to grow each year.

We are concerned Catholics trying to save our school. Canon law exhorts us to do this. “The faithful are to promote Catholic schools, doing everything possible to help in establishing and maintaining them (Can. 800.2).”

When Pope John Paul spoke to American bishops on October 28, 1983, he stressed the value of Catholic schools. You have been personally entrusted by Pope John Paul II with the responsibility of fostering and advancing Catholic schools in the Milwaukee Archdiocese. From the actions taken by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee in the recent closings of MESSMER HIGH SCHOOL and St. John’s School for the Deaf, it would appear that you are not following the guidelines of Canon Law and the instructions of the Pope. A continued policy of this nature would appear to endanger the Catholic School System in the Archdiocese.

We will not rest until you hear the cry of your people. Again, are you King in your Kingdom or Shepherd to your Flock?”

- An open letter to Archbishop Rembert Weakland, 31 May, 1984

By the 1970s, Messmer High School began to experience the early signs of crisis that would eventually result in its closing. The urban parishes which had sustained the school in its earlier years were rapidly shrinking as white parishioners left for the suburbs. The archdiocese could neither staff the school with teaching sisters, who had not replenished their numbers following retirement, nor afford lay teachers. Additionally,

the school's inability to maintain a core administration and faculty presented serious problems with its accreditation.

It is during the time period from 1970 to 1990 that we can clearly see two of the biggest inaccuracies about Messmer: that the school has consistently represented the ideal Catholic school as celebrated by Bryk, Lee, and Holland and that its closing and reopening is the result of a powerful grassroots coalition that spanned the entire city.

In 1970, the Milwaukee Archdiocese had 687,805 Catholics in 264 parishes, with about 35% of the total population as members.⁴⁵⁵ While this might seem high, both the total church membership and overall percentage numbers peaked just five years before and steadily declined since then. According to *Churches and Church Membership in the United States*, Milwaukee County had 171 Catholic churches in 1971 with 377,604 full participants. This represented 35.8% of the total population and 62.5% of persons claiming a religious affiliation.⁴⁵⁶

By 1975, the neighborhood surrounding Messmer barely resembled the one that welcomed the school in 1929. What once was a quiet neighborhood had become home to a commercial area on one of the city's main east-west avenues. A major freeway bordered the school's west side, and the residential population was lower than it had been in decades. Between 1970 and 1980, the city experienced an 11% decline in population. While not as sharp, the population continued to fall in the next decade. In 1970, Milwaukee's population was 717,372. By 1980, it had fallen to 636,295. In 1990, the

⁴⁵⁵ David M. Cheney, *Catholic Hierarchy*. Archdiocese of Milwaukee. catholicierarchy.org. 19 November, 2007.

⁴⁵⁶ Douglas W. Johnson, Paul R. Ricard, and Bernard Quinn, For the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA *Churches and Church Membership in the United States*. Washington DC: Glenamry Research Center, 1974. 224.

total had dropped further to 628,086.⁴⁵⁷ White Flight certainly contributed to this change – and as families moved to the suburbs, the impact on urban parishes was devastating. In 1977 alone, one thousand families left the St. Elizabeth parish!⁴⁵⁸ By 1980, the city was 73% white, 23% black, and nearly all of the remaining 4% were of "Spanish" origin.⁴⁵⁹ Even with the declining population, Milwaukee was the seventeenth largest American city in 1984, making it larger than Boston (19th) and Cleveland (22nd).

The percentage of Catholics in the archdiocese of Milwaukee began to increase, although the number of both male and female religious fell. In 1980, there were 713,000 Catholics, or about 34.7% of the population, in 266 Milwaukee parishes. The number of priests fell to 1,080 from 1,150 a decade earlier, which meant that in 1970 there were 660 Catholics for each priest. The total number of nuns fell from 3,855 in 1970 to 3,673 in 1980⁴⁶⁰ This number reflects the total number of female religious in the archdiocese; it does not suggest that all of these were teaching sisters.



Figure 5.1: Messmer in the Seventies. Source: Messmer High School

⁴⁵⁷ Milwaukee Urban Atlas, "Population Characteristics." City of Milwaukee, March 2003, 7.

⁴⁵⁸ Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives. MC 75 Messmer High School Vertical File "St. Elizabeth Parish 1902-1977."

⁴⁵⁹ Milwaukee, Wisconsin Metropolitan Area...Today 1987. Compiled in conjunction with the ULI District Council Network Meeting October 25-27, 1987. Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Washington, DC: The Urban Land Institute 1987. 46

⁴⁶⁰ David M. Cheney, "Archdiocese of Milwaukee" www.catholic-hierarchy.org. Accessed 18 October, 2007.

Without question, both public and parochial schools were changing.

Archdiocesan schools were much more diverse than in previous years, but enrollment was dropping. A 1977 study acknowledged "the school age population had begun to decline" and noted fewer infant baptisms in parishes as well as diminished "attractiveness" and usage of parish facilities.⁴⁶¹ From 1970 to 1976, overall Archdiocesan enrollment declined 8.7%, with the greatest drop (16.3%) occurring in the city of Milwaukee. Public schools in Milwaukee faced a similar (16.83%) reduction. The students were moving north - Washington (15%), Ozaukee (8.3%) and Waukesha (1.2%) counties each experienced significant increases in student enrollment.⁴⁶² From 1977 to 1987, the Archdiocese closed 14 elementary schools and consolidated 5 of 12 high schools. Francis Jordan and Holy Angels were both same-sex parish affiliated schools on the northwest side of Milwaukee; the other schools were located outside the city.

Students, parents, and faculty at Messmer were aware of the Archdiocese's grim outlook for the school's future and fear of closing seemed to overshadow almost all of its activities. "Declining enrollment" is the single most cited reason for closing the school, and the numbers fell dramatically. In 1970, there were 974 students.⁴⁶³ By 1980, the number had fallen to 650, and the year it closed, there were just 313 students enrolled at Messmer.⁴⁶⁴ Nationally, enrollment in private schools actually rose from 1.3 million

⁴⁶¹ Leslie Darnieder, "Planning for Catholic Schools in the Eighties" Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives File AS 122, Box 5.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶³ Archdiocese of Milwaukee Department of Education Records. File AS 121, Box 11, Folder 5

⁴⁶⁴ Messmer *Capitol*.

students in 1968-69 to 1.4 million in 1984.⁴⁶⁵ In Milwaukee, public high school enrollment was 36,539 in 1969 and 29,316 in 1980.⁴⁶⁶

Academic records are missing following the 1984 closing until 1999, when the school regained its archdiocesan affiliation. There is no official record of enrollment data at the archdiocese and Messmer's own records were not available. Enrollment data presented here for these years is based on estimates obtained from school yearbooks. While these are certainly not the most accurate numbers, they do offer approximate figures that account for both students and faculty and provide an opportunity to make a visual estimate of the ethnicity of students. Additionally, as many students still posted parish affiliations in the student directory, it is possible to estimate students' religions and residential areas.

It is clear, though, that operating expenses had increased substantially as enrollments declined. For the 1982-83 school year, Messmer's tuition was \$1435, the lowest amount of any high school in the archdiocese. Pius XI was only fifty dollars more, but at Pius, tuition covered 95% of the school's budget expenses. At Messmer, tuition barely covered 66% of the school's expenses.⁴⁶⁷ Possible explanations for this include larger enrollments at Pius XI, as well as less faculty turnover. Having long term faculty locked into set salary schedules meant, among other things, that a school could keep costs down by not having to pay ever-increasing new teacher salaries.

At Messmer, the lack of retention among the school's teachers and administrators was a major concern. The school was no longer home to the same core of faculty and

⁴⁶⁵ National Center for Education Statistics *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. (January, 1993) 37.

⁴⁶⁶ Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent's Report. 1969. p.10.; Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent's Report. 1980. p. 27.

⁴⁶⁷ "Archdiocese High Schools Tuition Data," 1 February, 1983. Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives School Board Meetings October 1982-February 1984. File MC 75, Box 18, Folder7.

staff that had served for decades. In the last three years of the school's archdiocesan affiliation, there were three principals: the Rev. John Pulice, who was principal from 1977-82, Sister Gill in 1983, and Dr. Gary Candelario in 1984. This unstable leadership likely had serious implications on virtually every element of the school day.

Because defining events of this period are so closely associated with the closing and subsequent reopening of Messmer, it is very difficult to obtain specific data that relate to anything else. However, it is within the struggle to keep the school open, that we can discover quite a bit about how the Archdiocese, parents and students, and the community at large regarded Messmer. Sometimes, these perspectives specifically name the school's academic record, its sense of community, and its commitment to social justice. Other times, these feelings are evident without explicit acknowledgement.

Although Archbishop Rembert Weakland bore the brunt of the blame for closing Messmer, he maintains that the school's viability was a concern when he arrived in Milwaukee in 1977. Enrollment was down, operating costs were rising, and Central City parish elementary schools were not supporting Messmer as the high school of choice for their graduates. Further, Weakland believed that the construction of Interstate 43 damaged the school and its students by "separating a building and its use from its natural constituency."⁴⁶⁸ The highway served as both a physical and psychological barrier, and Weakland suggests that parishioners in Messmer's geographic community from St. Casmir and Mary Czestochowa in particular, one of Milwaukee's few North side Polish enclaves, resisted being identified with a school that served increasing numbers of African-American students. Communities neighboring Messmer, especially North

⁴⁶⁸ Archbishop Rembert Weakland, interview by author, audio recording, St. Francis, WI, 15 October, 2003.

Milwaukee and Sherman Park, were in transition, and although the new majority was African-American, a very small Hmong constituency was also emerging.

Academic Excellence

While most of the direct commentary related to Messmer's academic curriculum is present in uncomplimentary reports related to the school's reaccreditation, yearbooks and school newspapers indicate that the school still offered a selection of classes that closely resembled a comprehensive high school. The school offered a liberal arts courses, but in addition to these classes, there were also a number of music and arts classes that extended beyond the usual music electives, and the business/commerce program was still in place late into the Seventies.

A major change from earlier decades was that religious faculty were no longer the core of the teaching staff. Most teachers were not affiliated with the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and in addition to losing a major symbol of the school's religious affiliation, Messmer also lost attention to professional development that was encouraged by the teaching sisters' order. The faculty had once been all white and mostly female. The SSND taught every subject except for religion, which was taught by white priests. By the mid 1970's, over half the faculty was lay, and there was usually at least one teacher of color.

In 1969 and 1970, there were 26 lay faculty. In 1971, there were 23. By 1974, 20 of the 46 teachers were lay, representing a higher percentage of non-religious teachers because the total teaching staff was slightly lower than in previous years. Also in 1974,

there were three African –American instructors; of these, two were religious.⁴⁶⁹ By 1983, most religious faculty were gone.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Faculty</u>	<u>Lay Faculty</u>	<u>Faculty of Color</u>
1976	43	23	2
1977	48	26	3
1978	45	28	0
1979	46	26	1
1980	44	26	2
1983	30	23	3

Table 5.1 Messmer Faculty Source: Messmer *Capitol*

The school began a National Honor Society chapter in 1970. Father Kuehn returned to Messmer for the initial installation of members; the school’s chapter was named in his honor.⁴⁷⁰ It is surprising that NHS arrived so late, especially because the school encouraged so many honors for students in earlier decades, and the standards for NHS also included service, character, and leadership - qualities that were especially desirable in a Catholic school. Beyond this, finding records of excellence is even more problematic than in past years. One of the few mentions in the yearbook was Dean Vernon being elected governor of Badger Boys State in 1982.⁴⁷¹ While this was certainly an honor, there is no record of a comparable amount of scholarships or awards earned by Messmer students. The most likely explanation for this is a combination of a decline in awards being earned along with a lack of administrative attention to the students' achievement.

⁴⁶⁹ Messmer *Capitol*. 1968, 1969-1971, 1974.

⁴⁷⁰ Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no.6. 21 May, 1970.

⁴⁷¹ Messmer *Capitol* 1982.

As noted in Chapter Four, the number of people who chose Messmer did so for religious rather than academic reasons. In 1970, the *Foursquare* presented a survey to students and parents. 45% of parents and 78% of students responded to a question seeking the reasons for choosing Messmer. 44% chose Catholic education and/or the religious and moral background; 19% preferred the “high standards at Messmer;” 12% selected “good discipline;” 10% indicated that Messmer was the student’s choice; 9% chose the atmosphere and spirit of Messmer, and only 6% preferred the school’s academic program.⁴⁷² These results suggest that academics were barely a consideration at all for most students.

By the late seventies, Messmer began to lose its luster as one of Milwaukee's premier high schools. By 1984, it is apparent that the hallmarks of a 'good Catholic school' were fading, at best, and at worst, not present at all. Bryk, Lee and Holland state that the academic structure of the Catholic schools they observed in the mid-1980's "remained closely coupled to their traditional mission of simultaneously fostering the intellectual development and the character development of all their students."⁴⁷³ Typically, this meant students in Catholic schools enrolled in a greater number of academic courses than students in public schools and took four years of required religion classes. However, Messmer's own board of directors conceded that there were serious curriculum problems, no formal admissions standards, a reputation as a school for slow learners, and in dire need of a remedial reading program.⁴⁷⁴ This, combined, with external reports associated with the school's closing indicates that the school was failing.

⁴⁷² Messmer *Foursquare* 43, no. 4. 26 February, 1970.

⁴⁷³ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 102.

⁴⁷⁴ Messmer School Board Meeting 4 January, 1983 minutes.

Studies commissioned by the Archdiocese, combined with projected enrollment and expenses predicted a bleak future for Messmer. One report, authored by Sr. Elizabeth Ann Glysh and delivered in the middle of January 1982, served as the foundation for what would later be viewed as the Archdiocese's commitment to saving Messmer even though the report is hardly optimistic. The Glysh report viewed Messmer as viable due to its adequate resource base, good enrollment, good condition of the physical plant, and its well-liked and supported administration. However, her summary noted the school lacked a positive small school model, had a "provincial" faculty with little higher education or lengthy tenure, a lack of a long-term plan, faculty mistrust of the Archdiocese combined with "poor me" attitudes, and pervasive faculty racism. Her recommendations included the immediate creation of a long-term plan, better communication with the Archdiocese, development and adherence to a mission plan, and an increased subsidy from the Archdiocese.⁴⁷⁵ A copy of this report was submitted to Messmer's principal, Gary Candelario, who then forwarded it on to Messmer's Board of Education.

The school's eleven-member board, comprised mostly of parents and alumni, was aware that the school was in need of a clear public and private identity; both the board and principal Candelario sought means to create long-term stability. In a December 2, 1982 memorandum relaying his findings, Candelario called the board to action. "We are now down to the business of deciding the fate and future of Messmer High School. You are becoming part of the history of Messmer High School. Your

⁴⁷⁵ Report to Fr John Hanley from Sr. Elizabeth Ann Glysh, 13 January, 1982. Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives, file MC75.

decisions in the next few days and weeks will determine what happens to the school for a long time to come.”⁴⁷⁶

The projected enrollment for the 1982-1983 school year was 375 students, based upon the 1982 figure of 436 students. This projection also reflected changing demographics, as for the first time whites were no longer the overwhelming majority group. About 65% of these students were white, and about 75% were Catholic. However, there was an increasing percentage of African-American students (33%), and of these students, 89% were not Catholics; both of which were perceived as challenges to the predominantly white staff. Among other concerns, Dr. Candelario noted an excess of full time teaching staff and a projected budget deficit of almost \$255,000. His recommendations for reducing expenses included a modest tuition increase and elimination of faculty positions. The two most ambitious points of his plan included a long-range capital outlay with extensive building additions and repairs and a major change in instructional programming. Messmer had become known as a “basketball school”, and Candelario believed that the school’s future depended on academic offerings. By addressing these issues, his plan to remold Messmer as a performing arts and technology specialty school would prepare the school to face a more certain future. However, it seems that this plan would further encourage low academic achievement, rely on programs that could share few resources, and do little to address concerns raised by critics of the existing school, especially since neither specialty was at all academic.

Without any apparent action from the Archdiocese, in late 1982, the school announced in *Milwaukee Sentinel* that Messmer would become a "specialty" school in

⁴⁷⁶ Memorandum to Messmer Board of Education from Gary Candelario. 2 December, 1982, Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives, file MC75.

order to attract students. The school would offer programs in the performing arts, data processing, and other areas including youth renewal.⁴⁷⁷ It is likely that in this case "specialty" means "alternative" because these were not academic programs. On December 20, 1982, almost a week after the *Sentinel* article, Candelario sent a letter to parents offering a nearly identical version of the proposal he submitted to the archdiocese. He was clear that Messmer was to become a school to develop specialties but not to become an exclusive school for traditional gifted and talented students. From this, one can only conclude that Candelario knew that Messmer had no future as a college preparatory school and was simply trying to come up with a solution that would allow the school to remain open.

Messmer was clearly in a restructuring phase. Within two school years, the school had four different principals, two directors of development, and periods of time with no vice principals.⁴⁷⁸ In its self-evaluation for North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools accreditation, Messmer's report noted seven major themes: there was an untapped reserve of support resources, a need for more (and more visible) archdiocesan support, faculty and students needed to develop a more positive image of Messmer, the school's development program needed a major overhaul, aggressive and affirmative public relations projects were needed, the school needed a unifying self-definition, and religious instruction should be prioritized.⁴⁷⁹

While the NCA review committee agreed in principle with a number of these self-assessments, they found that even within these seven themes, problems and potential

⁴⁷⁷ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 14 December 1982.

⁴⁷⁸ "An Open Letter to Archbishop Rembert Weakland" *Milwaukee Journal* 31 May, 1984.

⁴⁷⁹ North Central re-evaluation self-study, Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives, file MC75.

problems were far more substantial than the self-study indicated, especially in areas of instruction. Reports from their October 1981 visit uncovered serious concerns that left Messmer's accreditation in danger. Of greatest concern was a number of infractions, including areas that produced warnings in the 1982 and 1983 reviews, that demanded immediate attention. The committee was alarmed by teachers who lacked sufficient college credits or student teaching, instructors teaching out of area, library/media expenditures far below their recommended per pupil rates, and the lack of course offerings in practical arts.⁴⁸⁰ In light of the serious nature of the other findings, adding practical arts courses might have caused more problems for the school as it would have made the school even more of a comprehensive high school. At any rate, because several of the more serious violations were uncorrected from previous reviews, “even though the Wisconsin State Committee recommended full accreditation, the NCA commissioners couldn’t see their way clear to accept the state level recommendation. Hence, Messmer ended this year’s process on a second warning.”⁴⁸¹ Further violations would result in the loss of the school’s accreditation, a major blow to the archdiocese’s longstanding image of excellence in education.

Archbishop Weakland, already concerned with the increased operating costs associated with Messmer, decided to close the school at the end of the school year. This was not a surprise decision; it had been a topic of many contentions meetings with Messmer's board, and it is discussed in greater detail in the 'community' section of this chapter. The Save Messmer Committee was incensed by what they perceived as the Archbishop’s recalcitrance, demonstrated by his refusal to participate in at least four

⁴⁸⁰ North Central Evaluation, Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives, file MC75.

⁴⁸¹ Letter to Shirley Forbes, enclosed in 1983-1984 North Central Report Analysis, Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives, file MC75, box 18, folder 2.

meetings to discuss options to save the school, and it filed suit in early June 1984 to prevent the sale of Messmer.⁴⁸² Years later, Weakland said that he was willing to work with the committee if there had been a serious plan on the table, but he was concerned with the quality of both instructors and programs that were to be offered.⁴⁸³ The lawsuit, however, garnered results quickly. On June 6th, in exchange for dropping its suit, the Save Messmer Committee was granted time to submit an offer to the archdiocese. Attorney Peter Salza was optimistic that funds could be raised from businesses and charitable foundations.

By the second week in August, a deal was in place: the building, property, and contents of Messmer High School were sold to the newly established Messmer High School, Inc. for \$375,000. The new organization was comprised of a few members of the SMC, and the initial title agreement stipulated that the facility must be used for school purposes. Tuition would not increase, Barbara Macknick was named principal, and the school would open in the fall as a private, independent Catholic high school. According to board president Carol Rauen, the school would “start small” but would offer quality instruction and be “theologically sound.”⁴⁸⁴ Presumably, Messmer would continue to serve as it had before, as a “Catholic, co-educational, fully integrated high school.”⁴⁸⁵

Despite the committee's success, the early years of the “new” Messmer High School were not problem-free. Funds were extremely tight; teachers were inexperienced (only two were retained from the previous faculty, presumably due to the belief that their jobs were gone when the school closed); and maintaining enrollment was challenging.

⁴⁸² *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 1 June, 1984.

⁴⁸³ Rembert Weakland, interview by author, audio recording, St. Francis, WI, 15 October, 2003.

⁴⁸⁴ *Catholic Herald*, 16 August, 1984.

⁴⁸⁵ “An open letter to Archbishop Rembert Weakland.” 31 May, 1981.

Further, even establishing a system of governance was difficult. The leadership framework provided by the archdiocese was gone. Their long association with the School Sisters of Notre Dame ended along with the Archdiocesan affiliation, and other independent local Catholic groups including the House of Peace were not interested in taking over the school. Even its first principal, Barbara Macknick, resigned as principal before the end of the first semester, and former Messmer English and music teacher, Janice Stauske took over.⁴⁸⁶ *She* was replaced in the middle of the next year by Sister Marie Van Dyke, who came out of retirement to fill the position.⁴⁸⁷ It was not until the 1986-1987 that Brother Bob Smith was named as permanent principal, and he continues to serve as president of Messmer Catholic Schools.

Jackie Veith was a new teacher who had recently relocated to Milwaukee, so she had no knowledge of the school's heritage or recent controversy, although she was immediately informed of the closing. The incident served as a painful reminder of the school's fragile existence, even for faculty and students who were new to the school. Frustration and bitterness over the suddenness of the closing were common, and "We lived with that. It was an open wound for probably the first three to four years. People were still in shock."⁴⁸⁸ Perhaps the bitterness of the few remaining faculty and students spread to the newcomers, or perhaps these feelings indicate an immediate sense of ownership in teachers and students new to Messmer, but it is clear that most of the people who felt any real damage from the school's closing had long since moved on. Nonetheless, even years after the school reopened, new and old faculty members alike - even those with no justification - were still angry about the closing.

⁴⁸⁶ *Milwaukee Journal*, 11 December, 1984.

⁴⁸⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, 9 January, 2003.

⁴⁸⁸ Jackie Veith, interview by author, audio recording, Milwaukee, WI, 13 October, 2003.

Reminders that the school had been closed were everywhere. Prior to the sale, other archdiocesan schools had taken library books, desks, and other equipment for their own use. When the “new” Messmer opened, teachers found nearly empty classrooms with mismatched desks, incomplete textbook series, and a virtually nonexistent budget from which supplies could be purchased. In fact, on more than one occasion, Jackie recalled the staff being told to deposit their paychecks immediately because they might not clear a few days later. She claimed that despite the uncertainty, most teachers thrived in the unusual atmosphere. The lack of school resources inspired teachers’ creativity, she said, and neither Jackie nor Greg Borowski, a Messmer senior, recall any deficits in instruction. This is incredibly hard to believe, especially considering the unhappy feelings many harbored toward the archdiocese. Jackie said that although the whole school was in “survival mode,” a commitment to providing quality education to students was the primary focus, so teachers chose to move forward rather than dwell on what was not available.⁴⁸⁹ This also seems unlikely in light of the faculty's lingering feelings of bitterness *despite* the fact that they had either kept or gained a job with "new" Messmer.



Figure 5.2: Student Project. Source: Messmer High School

⁴⁸⁹ Jackie Veith, interview by author, audio recording, Milwaukee, WI, 3 November, 2003.

Community

The notion of a Messmer community from 1970-1990 is relatively consistent with Bryk, Lee, and Holland's ideals, although this community was becoming less robust. In particular, Messmer's clubs, athletic teams, and religious activities (despite a declining Catholic student population) still provided an opportunity for students and their families, faculty, and alumni to bond together. While this was likely true for any Catholic school, the 'Messmer Community' -not academics- was the most often cited reason for keeping the school open. In an open letter to Archbishop Weakland, the Save Messmer Committee stated that "the family is the base of all education...there is a unique spirit among the families that come together to form the MESSMER FAMILY." Messmer, they claimed, was able to extend the family into "the Messmer family" because it was the only "Catholic, co-educational, fully integrated high school" in Milwaukee.⁴⁹⁰

Students continued to celebrate their belief in idea of a Messmer community through their involvement in clubs and activities but there were fewer options than in the past. In 1976, for example, there were the standard club offerings - foreign language clubs, performing arts, student publications, and student service organizations – and a handful of other clubs such as the M Club, Liturgy and Human Relations.⁴⁹¹ Students from just two decades earlier had a seemingly endless list of clubs and organizations from which to choose, including practically every academic subject, and most clubs had dozens of students as members. It is possible that the smaller number of clubs and

⁴⁹⁰ "An Open Letter to Archbishop Rembert Weakland," The Save Messmer Committee 31 May, 1984.

⁴⁹¹ Messmer *Capitol* 1976.

activities encouraged members to be more enthusiastic and identify more strongly with a particular club in order to ensure its survival.

After a long hiatus, in 1980 the homerooms once again produced one act plays for a school-wide festival.⁴⁹² After 1980, the music program seemed to recharge, and once again there were multiple performing groups, including a women's ensemble, treble choir, chamber choir, and several vocal ensembles, which would support both holiday assemblies and special programs. This also brought a return to the school's presence in the outside community, as special performances were given to local elementary schools and evening shows were open to the public.

By the January 4, 1983 meeting of Messmer's board of education, conflict was evident to the entire school community. Although Messmer was the oldest school in the archdiocese, it was the last to implement a development program. However, the board decided to begin to solicit support from alumni for the new specialty curriculum. In addition, Athletic Director Don Simeth announced that the school would withdraw its football program from the Metro Conference. Principal Candelario apologized for making this decision before the board discussed the issue, and a heated debate ensued regarding the board's authority. Members Leonard Borowski and John Crowley were especially critical of the dismissal of their authority, but Father John Hanley, Superintendent of Schools and the archdiocesan representative, insisted that all decisions on almost all matters were ultimately the responsibility of the archdiocese. However, there was agreement that the school needed to take action quickly. In addition to concerns over the school's academic reputation, the board determined that religious coursework should become sensitive to the increasing numbers of students who "are not

⁴⁹² Messmer *Capitol* 1980.

Catholic and/or Black.” Finally, there was a debate surrounding setting admission standards that yielded no results. Essentially, board members were concerned that there was no formal standard but there was no agreement on any possible solution.⁴⁹³

Student publications were no longer a showcase for the school’s language arts department, and after several years of inconsistency, *Foursquare* did not publish a single issue in 1983, possibly because the sponsoring class had been discontinued. Despite the fact that closed meetings about Messmer’s future had turned into an unpleasant public debate in which the Archdiocese and its detractors sniped at each other in the newspapers, students tried to maintain positive attitudes, especially in their publications.

The opening page of the *Capitol* took a bold and hopeful stance in 1983, claiming:

Capitol 1983 - the ultimate word and picture authority of Messmer High School. An entirely new representation of the Messmer language as it is written and spoken today - more useful and authoritative than any previous yearbook. A masterpiece of precise defining with the advantages of pictures of well known students to demonstrate school spirit and make meanings clearly understandable. 136 pages – magnificent color pictures.

Apparently, this ‘new representation’ did not include complete sentences; however, the students' belief in themselves and their school is refreshing. Later in the opening, the yearbook proclaims: “Messmer is people! People coming together in faith, love, and concern in order to grow physically, spiritually, mentally, intellectually, and socially best describes Messmer High School.”⁴⁹⁴ Students and staff knew that the school had been targeted for closure, but clearly they were under the impression that Messmer would receive the support they needed to stay open because of the extended school

⁴⁹³ Messmer Board of Education Minutes. 4 January, 1983.

⁴⁹⁴ Messmer *Capitol* 1984.

community; this yearbook was dedicated to the “new” specialty school that had been proposed as the best option to save the school.

The optimism that some resolution could be reached carried into the next year. The 1984 yearbook was dedicated to “you, the people who are Messmer” and, while only 55 pages long, featured several photo essays designed to capture the “Messmer experience.” This edition was at once a celebration of the students, a plea for the school to remain open, and a sort of time capsule in case the school was closed.

Beyond the publications, many of the remaining clubs had no academic affiliation at all. For example, the Mug Club was comprised of senior boys “who encourage enthusiasm and good times” by supporting the local breweries. Drinking seemed to become an acceptable school-related activity in the Seventies. Photographs from many clubs’ gatherings, formal banquets, and casual gatherings often feature students and their parents drinking together. Additionally, both the student directories and yearbook advertisements feature brand-name references to a wide variety of beer and liquors.

The clubs for students of various ethnic origins had been replaced by the Human Relations Club, which was formed to help “students realize their heritage is important.”⁴⁹⁵ The school also continued to welcome students' families into the school; mother-son, mother-daughter, and father-daughter events were also common. While entertaining, these ideas and activities are not consistent with Bryk, Lee, and Holland's assertion that Catholic schools share a core academic curriculum, extracurricular activities, and a religious environment.

Further, Messmer no longer looked like an old Catholic school; much of the religious symbols had been removed or replaced. By 1977, very few of the remaining

⁴⁹⁵ Messmer *Capitol* 1977.

teaching sisters wore religious attire at all, although some did wear a simple veil with their secular clothing. Similarly, only the Roman collar that some priests wore distinguished them from other male faculty. More conservative priests wore black trousers and shirts; none wore a full cassock. This change removed one of the major symbols of Messmer's Catholic affiliation.

Students seemed to identify far less with their home parish than in years past. As many non-Catholic students had done in the past, religious students would list their Protestant church in the Senior Directory. However, it was also becoming more common to simply list the public elementary school from which the student graduated. As was the case with most other Catholic schools, religious affiliation was no longer a major factor in admitting students to Messmer.⁴⁹⁶ Religion was still evident, in some ways. The Liturgy club remained active, students still were required to attend retreats, and the Senior Mass was still an important part of graduation activities.

The school's tradition of athletic prowess was absent throughout most of the 1970's, when the football and basketball teams were consistently bad. Two of the biggest highlights came in 1976, when a wrestler placed 2nd in state and the cross country team placed 7th in the state championship.⁴⁹⁷ By the late 70s, though, the athletic teams improved a bit. In 1979, the baseball team placed second in the state tournament, the basketball team won the region and placed third in the state, both the cross country and track teams were seventh in state, and the football team even posted a 6-3 record.⁴⁹⁸ Basketball had been Messmer's showcase sport, and this tradition seemed to resume. In 1982, the team posted a 25-4 record and advanced to the state tournament. Athletics

⁴⁹⁶ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 129.

⁴⁹⁷ Messmer *Capitol* 1976.

⁴⁹⁸ Messmer *Capitol* 1979.

remained a focal point of the school for many students, especially as it was able to remain competitive with the larger and more stable schools in its conference.

Crime had become more common both inside the school and in the surrounding neighborhoods. Messmer was no longer the centerpiece of a quiet, working-class area, although it tried to respond to criminal activity as positively as possible. In one incident in the spring of 1984, Paul Sweet was stabbed in the back while rehearsing for the school musical. When students heard breaking glass, Sweet went to an outside door, where he was kicked and stabbed by a group of five assailants. Despite being hospitalized for several wounds, including one barely missed his heart, Sweet was quick to forgive his attacker, saying “The kid who did this is human.”⁴⁹⁹

This notion of forgiveness is consistent with the broader Christian sense of social justice found in most other Catholic schools, but Messmer's idea of social justice had moved its focus from outside the school to inside. Bryk, Lee, and Holland state, “Catholic schools deliberately strive to inculcate an understanding of and commitment to social justice in all their students.”⁵⁰⁰ After decades of having a predominantly white student body, the school was fully multiracial and multicultural. This meant that students no longer had to look outside the school walls to find a wide variety of ethnic origins and religious practice, and this affected students' concept of what 'others' looked like.

Additionally, for the first time in its history, Messmer actively sought assistance from any possible source in order to remain open. Messmer's board ended the 1983 by making ambitious fundraising plans for the next year. This was necessary; the projected

⁴⁹⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 April, 1983; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 22 April, 1983.

⁵⁰⁰ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 129.

deficit ranged from \$250,000 to \$277,000.⁵⁰¹ Alumni were contacted for raffles, bingo events were scheduled, and any and all other options were considered. The special meeting did not assuage feelings of antagonism toward the Archdiocese, and Leonard Borowski in particular was concerned that there was a negative perception of Messmer even within the Archdiocese.⁵⁰² This is probable, considering the amount of authority the board assumed for itself. Further, it is also likely that the contentious nature of the dispute between the board and Weakland created factions within the immediate Messmer community.

Residual tensions from board meetings did not fade, though. In fact, although Messmer was never mentioned by name, the Archbishop issued a three-column series in the *Herald* in late December and early January calling for financial responsibility in ministry and stewardship. In these columns, Weakland used language similar to that from the November 11th meeting and reminded readers that institutions operated by the church, including schools, were public trusts and would be operated responsibly, for the good of the whole church, not just a single parish.⁵⁰³ Meanwhile, Messmer's board spent the winter months assembling potential donors, recruiting for students in schools, church bulletins, and through the House of Peace, an outreach organization geared toward inner-city African-Americans started by the Capuchins and managed by Brother Booker Ashe. Budget and Development committees scrambled to create reports, and one major point of the school's February 7, 1984 meeting was to contact the *Herald Citizen* in order to attract more positive publicity for the school. Board members clearly believed that they

⁵⁰¹ Messmer Board of Education Minutes. 4 October, 1983.

⁵⁰² *Catholic Herald*, 17 March, 1983, 14.

⁵⁰³ *Catholic Herald*, 29 December, 1983; 12 January, 1984; 19 January, 1984.

still had an opportunity to save Messmer's place within the Archdiocese. This, however, was not the case.

Although the Saturday, February 11, 1984 editions of both the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel* announced that Messmer would close at the end of the year, students and parents learned the news in a different fashion. While both Archbishop Weakland and Greg Borowski believe that someone at a closed meeting at St. John's Cathedral leaked the story to both the school and the media, there is no indication that this actually took place. The school prepared a letter for students to take home stating that because enrollment goals had not been met, Archbishop Weakland decided to close the school in June, despite an earlier commitment for assistance.⁵⁰⁴ Students learned of the closing when, following a meeting with faculty and staff, Sister Miriam Gill read the letter to parents over the school intercom. Greg Borowski, a junior at the time, believed that this announcement came as a response to students who had already learned of the letter. However, even though rumors were circulating by lunchtime, a heavy silence that fell over the school following the end of the day announcement.⁵⁰⁵



Figure 5.3: Student Protest. Source: Messmer High School

⁵⁰⁴ *Catholic Herald*, 16 February, 1984.

⁵⁰⁵ Greg Borowski, interview by author, audio recording, Milwaukee, WI 6 January, 2004.

The Borowski family mobilized almost immediately. Although most of the family had already attended and graduated from the school, there were several active connections. Leonard served on the school's board and his sons David and Greg were still enrolled. David, a senior, was student body president, Greg was editor of the school paper, and both were on the basketball team. On February 15th, David organized over 175 students for a rally outside the school. A major complaint of students was that rumors of the school's closing guaranteed that enrollment goals could not be met, since a student would not attend a school from which he or she would not ultimately graduate. Further, Messmer presented the only option for students who wanted to attend a "racially integrated, Christian, and coeducational" school.⁵⁰⁶ The Borowskis were not the only "Messmer family"; Jim and Mary Desing were also alumni, as were five of their children. Jim, a sophomore, would be the only member of his family to attend another school.⁵⁰⁷ The Messmer families, represented only partially by the Borowski and Desing families, were especially embittered by the Archbishop's decision.

A few days later, at the last basketball game held at the school, the mood was equally somber. Since the occasion also marked Parents' Night, a large group of parents stayed well after the game to discuss their options. The loose social network of parents who sat near each other at games began to formalize.⁵⁰⁸ In just a few days, the Committee to Save Messmer High School had formed. Their main objective was to keep the school open; they believed that enrolling 100 students for the fall term would be sufficient to persuade Archbishop Weakland to keep the school open. This belief seems

⁵⁰⁶ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 15 February, 1984.

⁵⁰⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, 16 February, 1984.

⁵⁰⁸ Greg Borowski, interview by author, audio recording, Milwaukee, WI, 6 January 2004.

naïve at best; Messmer was designed to hold 700-800 students, and an enrollment this small would certainly be unable to support the school's expenses. If that option was impossible, they were willing to reopen the Messmer as an independent, Catholic school at an estimated reopening cost of \$325,000.⁵⁰⁹ A public meeting of Messmer supporters generated other possibilities, including a possible merger with another school, the South side's Notre Dame High School. Although this school would also be closed, Sr. Michelle Olley quickly determined that this was not a feasible option.⁵¹⁰ A subsequent private meeting with the Archbishop and several families was not productive; Weakland told the *Catholic Herald* that his decision was final.⁵¹¹

The Committee to Save Messmer acted quickly. By late March, their attorneys Peter J. Salza, a Messmer alumnus working pro bono, and James Ryan were prepared to seek an injunction to prevent the sale of the school. Fundraisers including raffles, dances, and basketball games were held, parents compiled lists of similar schools in other cities that had remained open, and public criticism of the Archdiocese was more frequent and more vehement. Leonard Borowski's comment, "I don't want to challenge the Archbishop, but I will say he is wrong,"⁵¹² is typical of this more vocal criticism. By May, the group, by then known as the Save Messmer Committee (SMC), made an offer to rent Messmer for a dollar a year, purchase on a land contract, or purchase the school outright. Despite the lack of any positive reaction from the Archbishop, SMC began to dispense leaflets throughout the archdiocese to gain support and attract students. The

⁵⁰⁹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 27 March 1984.

⁵¹⁰ *Catholic Herald*, 8 March, 1984.

⁵¹¹ *Catholic Herald*, 23 February, 1984.

⁵¹² *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 30 March, 1984.

committee felt that numerous figures within the archdiocese had promised to keep the school open, and they were determined to hold them to their words.⁵¹³

Traditionally, Messmer seniors graduated a week before classes ended, and this was the case in 1984. The final graduation ceremony was filled with fond and tearful remembrances of the school, even as excited graduates prepared for their futures. The following Friday afternoon, May 25th, remaining underclassmen received yet another stunning announcement from their principal, Sr. Gill. Students were informed that as of the end of the day, the school would be closed permanently. Students were instructed to empty their lockers by 3:00 and would not be permitted to return. The official, somewhat ludicrous, reason given in a letter to parents was that the decision had been in place for some time to prevent vandalism, but students were stunned.⁵¹⁴ Parent and community reaction was swift. A demonstration was planned outside the Archbishop's residence and a scathing, vitriolic, full-page letter to the archbishop appeared in the *Milwaukee Journal*.⁵¹⁵ This letter, signed by many members of the Save Messmer Committee, condemned Archbishop Weakland as a poor shepherd whose word was unreliable as he apparently never intended to keep Messmer open.⁵¹⁶

While the school was saved over the summer by a significant monetary gift from the DeRance Foundation, Messmer also benefited from public sympathy from those who knew of its story. However, this did not translate into monetary contributions. Occasional donations would come in, but "major" donations included used copy paper from businesses (the school used the reverse side for classroom handouts), overstock

⁵¹³ *Catholic Herald*, 5 April, 1984.

⁵¹⁴ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 26 May, 1984.

⁵¹⁵ *Catholic Herald*, 31 May, 1984.

⁵¹⁶ *Milwaukee Journal*, 31 May, 1984.

clothing that was sorted and divided among faculty and students, and textbooks from other schools that were discarded when they were replaced. In fact, both Jackie and Greg suggest that Messmer's place as an outcast may have actually strengthened bonds between the faculty, students, and school community because of the significant commitment from all involved to make the school succeed despite the lack of resources.

Athletics helped the students and faculty of the 'new' Messmer reclaim a bit of its earlier identity, and the school not only was competitive in basketball but actually won a state championship in 1987. At the beginning of that academic year, enrollment had increased to 175 students. Len Borowski, president of MHS board of directors, hoped the school could increase recruiting to 200 with a maximum of 400 students. The religious orientation of students was similar to the pre-closing numbers; Principal Marie Van Dyke indicated that 40% were not Catholic. Tuition was \$1625 and increased 7% to \$1739 for the 1988 school year.⁵¹⁷

The school was still not immune to controversy, though. After Messmer reopened, much of the energy that went into fundraising to keep the school from closing was refocused into helping the school to meet its operating expenses. The Bishop's 600 Club, originally organized to raise funds to save Messmer, held a \$100 club dinner; tickets included an entry in a \$10,000 raffle.⁵¹⁸ The presence of cash donations was too much for Michele Chrisman, a volunteer who helped run bingo fundraisers for the school. School officials ordered an audit after realizing \$4000 had disappeared over a 20-month period. When volunteers accused Chrisman at a March meeting, she immediately confessed to the theft. In the criminal complaint, she was formally charged with the theft

⁵¹⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, 8 March, 1987.

⁵¹⁸ *Milwaukee Journal*, 15 May, 1986.

of over \$26,000.⁵¹⁹ Despite this setback, in the summer of 1988 the school announced that it had reached an important goal and earned a challenge grant for identifying new donors. By raising \$73,816, the school exceeded a \$70,000 requirement set by an anonymous donor who then gave the school an additional \$50,000. At this point, the school still received no funding from the Archdiocese, the state, or the federal government.”⁵²⁰

These small victories in spite of challenges seems to encourage the popular mythology of the school's reopening. Messmer was able to generate favorable media coverage of athletic events, field trips, and the acquisition of new equipment such as a grant-funded computer lab and began to gain a reputation as a scrappy survivor.

Social Justice

In addition to Messmer becoming less Catholic, the school was also becoming less white, and students were coming to the school from a wider variety of churches and non-Catholic elementary schools. After 1970, as the number of African-American students increased dramatically, so did the number of their home parishes. In addition to the ‘traditional’ African-American parishes, Messmer students were now hailing from the St. Rita, St. Anthony, Our Lady of Good Hope, St. Thomas Aquinas, Corpus Christi, and St. Gall parishes. Additionally, protestant students began noting their non-Catholic churches as well, so Antioch Baptist, St. George Episcopal, Mt. Zion Baptist, the Church of God in Christ, and St. Mark AME were also listed. However, an even more significant listing might be the simple omission of any religious affiliation at all. After 1972, over 20 students of color did not name any church, Catholic or otherwise, as their place of

⁵¹⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, 24 March, 1987.

⁵²⁰ *Milwaukee Journal*, 14 July, 1988.

worship. Latino students typically attended St. Sebastian and Asian Students St. John Nepomuc or St. Sebastian.

All of the parish information noted here came from the Messmer *Capitol*. Seniors listed their activities as well as their parishes; this information usually is self-reported. Therefore, it is not clear from the yearbooks whether the students actually attended the parishes they listed or if they simply indicated the parish in their residential area. However, a listing of a non-Catholic church probably indicates that the student did attend those services.

Students of color participated in activities at the same rate as white students, and for the most part participated in the same activities. All students were encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities, and in 1974, three quarters of the Junior class officers were Black.⁵²¹ The one difference was the school's drill team, whose members tended to be African-American girls. White girls typically joined the pom-pon squad. The drill team was able to design and perform their routines without any assistance from the band after 1975, when the team began to showcase their own female drummers.⁵²²

Gender issues also remained a concern with faculty. In 1970, Messmer was found guilty of violating the fair employment act when it did not provide a family health insurance policy to a lay teacher, Beverly Hundley, because she was not the head of her household.⁵²³ In the past, the school had only offered this benefit to male employees. The Wisconsin Equal Rights Division rejected the school's request for an exemption because of its status as a religious organization, and in addition to making insurance

⁵²¹ Messmer *Capitol*, 1974

⁵²² Messmer *Capitol*, 1975.

⁵²³ *Milwaukee Journal*, 11 December, 1970.

available to all employees; archdiocesan schools also actually removed a slight pay increase for head of household teachers.

Messmer also retained an odd mix of activities that reflected significant differences in social class. Well into the Seventies, the school maintained fairly large golf and ski clubs. While there were many public golf courses nearby and students could take advantages of low fees, golf was much more popular and accessible to suburbanites. Ski club required even greater access to resources because of equipment costs and the distance from the school to ski hills.

Messmer still maintained its service organizations, and a new club was created specifically to serve nearby schools and hospitals as well as the House of Peace. Messmer Community In Action gave student volunteers the opportunity to work with other volunteers, and this was one of the larger clubs prior to the school's closing.

Perhaps the largest social justice issue relates to the school's closing and whether it would leave an unfair gap in educational opportunities available to the students who would otherwise attend Messmer. By 1975, it was clear that declining enrollments and rising operating costs were not a passing trend and that Messmer must take action in order to save itself. In the meantime, the school and its surrounding neighborhoods were experiencing dramatic changes in their racial composition, and neither the school nor archdiocesan officials had a clear plan for accommodating any change.

A special meeting was called on February 15th to discuss a meeting between Principal Candelario and Archbishop Rembert Weakland. Candelario reported that the Archdiocese had committed to a subsidy of up to \$300,000 for the next five years, which would certainly offset the increasing projection of an over \$320,000 deficit for the 1983-

1984 school year. The archdiocesan “commitment” was the source of much hostility, even years later, but Candelario clearly corrected “committed” to “tentatively committed” (his emphasis) in the next meeting. There was another request from the board for an explanation of their authority, and a meeting was set for the entire board and the Archbishop.⁵²⁴

The special meeting on March 30, 1983 was time-consuming and contentious. The Archbishop was clearly in control, and although the board attempted to assert what it believed was its authority, Weakland made the reporting structure clear. The Archbishop was the head, but Sister Michelle Olley, the archdiocesan director of schools, was “responsible for all areas involving education.” He reviewed the by-laws of Messmer’s board and agreed that their “limited powers” were appropriate for “the normal running of the school.” Archbishop Weakland objected to the board’s “philosophical” decision to operate a specialty school, possibly because a data processing and performing arts program couldn’t possibly save the school’s already compromised reputation. Candelario himself acknowledged that perhaps the decision was a result of “an overeager principal and an overeager board.” Board members Borowski, Crowley, and Brennan were emphatic that because of rumors regarding the school’s closing, enrollment could not increase until there was a clear commitment from the Archdiocese. Further, action needed to be taken immediately. Neither Weakland nor Olley would commit to anything other than keeping the school open for another year and maintaining open communication, and Sr. Olley reminded the board, “We must be responsible stewards.”⁵²⁵

⁵²⁴ Messmer Board of Education Special Meeting Minutes. 15 March, 1983.

⁵²⁵ Messmer Board of Education Special Meeting Minutes. 30 March, 1983.

Seemingly unaware of the accreditation battle and despite a lack of optimism about enrollment, uncertainty about the projected budget for the 1983-1984 school year, and alumni groups' refusal to commit to fundraising until they were assured that the school would remain open, the board was optimistic that they would be able to satisfy archdiocesan requirements. Messmer's declining enrollment was not unique. Overall, the Archdiocese projected almost a two percent decline in its total area enrollment, which included suburban schools such as Pius XI and Waukesha Catholic Memorial. The demographics were similar for other urban schools, and from the early seventies until the late eighties, there was an overall decline in both public and private school enrollment.⁵²⁶

The largest archdiocesan enrollment declines were in inner city schools, and as a result of a statistical profile, the Archdiocese committed to providing financial assistance to at least seven inner-city parishes to sustain their elementary schools.⁵²⁷ Beyond this, the Messmer board's own study of archdiocesan projections from the elementary and middle schools likely to provide Messmer with students predicted a small decline followed by an increase beginning with the 1985-1986 school year.⁵²⁸ This projection was accurate; a small increase in national private school enrollment, consistent with archdiocesan predictions, began in the mid eighties, but this trend was not noted until after projections were made for Messmer's future.

It is important to note that while the school's overall enrollment declined, the percentage of minority students increased. This represents a significant trend in most urban Catholic schools and in the Milwaukee Public Schools system. In 1970-71,

⁵²⁶ *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1996, table 3.

⁵²⁷ *Catholic Herald* 26 May, 1983; 22 September, 1983.

⁵²⁸ Messmer High School "Enrollment and Budget Figure Explanations", Archdiocese of Milwaukee Archives, file MC75.

minority students represented 10.8% of the total national enrollment in Catholic schools. By 1983-1984, that percentage had increased to 20.2%.⁵²⁹ In Milwaukee, minorities represented 27.4% of the total public school enrollment in 1970, 35.6% in 1975, 54.7% in 1980, and 65.8% in 1988-1989.⁵³⁰ The chart below represents student enrollment and an approximation of nonwhite students based on an examination of school yearbooks.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Enrollment</u>	<u>Nonwhite Total</u>	<u>Seniors</u>	<u>Juniors</u>	<u>Sophomores</u>	<u>Freshmen</u>
1976	775	241	39	65	67	70
1977	786	257	61	60	73	63
1979	730	194	55	39	43	57
1980	650	158	36	35	45	42
1981	638	163	41	36	33	53
1982	564	177	36	31	47	63
1983	447	133	29	29	34	41
1984	313	132	30	32	30	40

Table 5.2: Students of Color. Source: Messmer *Capitol*.⁵³¹

Using the yearbook as a data source can be problematic, but it is useful in determining attitudes toward both race, gender, and religion. In the mid 1970's, students took a decidedly more casual approach to the senior directory, which used to only list students' names, activities, and parishes. In addition to listing activities and

⁵²⁹ Frank Bredeweg. *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, 1984-1985. A Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing.* Washington: NCEA. 1985. p.15.

⁵³⁰ *Quality Education in Milwaukee's Future.* Academy for Educational Development. New York: 1967. p.70; *Educational Trends in the 1980's.* Public Policy Forum. Milwaukee: 1989. p.4.

⁵³¹ Messmer *Capitol* 1976.

accomplishments, students also listed their nicknames, activities outside of school, and their “likes,” which often replaced any sort of parish affiliation. Some interesting and occasional appalling information was disclosed here, that either indicates misogyny and racism or, at the very least, that the faculty proofreader was less than attentive. For example, in 1977, a male student thanked “my punching bag,” a female student. Another male student considered “taking girls behind the stage” as one of the highlights of his year. Finally, a Latino student had “Taco” listed as his nickname.⁵³² This section did not become any more formal in subsequent years. In 1982, two male students mentioned “Rosey Palmer and her five friends” as a special part of their senior year.⁵³³



Figure 5.4: Art Class. Source: Messmer High School

African Americans were commonly selected as Homecoming and Prom courts, but it wasn't until the early 1980's that both the King and Queen were African American. Additionally, it was also common for mixed-race couples to attend these dances together. While this may be more of a reflection of the pool of available dates than a reflection of a

⁵³² Messmer *Capitol* 1977.

⁵³³ Messmer *Capitol* 1982.

progressive trend in racial attitudes, there are plenty of other photographs that suggest that at Messmer, black, white, Asian, and Latino students really did learn and play together by choice.

One of the more interesting aspects of the reopening of Messmer is both the initial financial assistance the SMC used to purchase a valuable Archdiocesan property in an accessible location and the lack of subsequent aid it received from the DeRance Foundation. The foundation was established by Miller Brewing heir Harry John and maintained by his contributions alone. DeRance was a relatively obscure organization devoted to religious, usually Catholic causes. Despite the low profile, the foundation was the largest Catholic charity in the world.⁵³⁴ Typically, grants ranged from \$10,000 to \$50,000 and were awarded with the expectation that DeRance know not only for what purpose the money was intended but also who would oversee its use. Inspired by the French monk Abbe Armand-Jean deRance, Harry John preferred to remain anonymous.⁵³⁵

John was connected to Milwaukee's inner core; one of his first projects was the creation of a summer camp for inner city children. He funded the camp himself; he and his fiancée served as camp directors and counselors. Both were quite fond of the children and at their wedding, they were "led down the aisle by fifteen black attendants, six and seven years old, wearing white gloves and carrying red corsages."⁵³⁶

Some of the early beneficiaries of DeRance grants in Milwaukee including the Father Stephen Youth Center, founded by Fr. James Groppi, were directed specifically

⁵³⁴ *National Catholic Reporter*, 17 October, 1993.

⁵³⁵ *Milwaukee Journal*, 31 October, 1976.

⁵³⁶ *National Catholic Reporter*, 17 October, 1993.

towards helping African-American children.⁵³⁷ However, as time passed, despite its local headquarters, the John family's strong community presence, and the foundation's patterns of donations to urban areas, DeRance dramatically reduced its donations in Milwaukee, especially to its primary beneficiary, the Milwaukee Archdiocese. A primary reason for this was a sharp ideological divide between the conservative John and the liberal Weakland; their beliefs differed sharply over both social welfare issues and the role of capitalism in society.⁵³⁸ Others also disagreed with DeRance policies. In fact, in 1982 six archdiocesan schools rejected a \$60,000 gift because of DeRance's insistence that the schools replace religious instruction textbooks that had previously been approved by the archdiocese. Father Anthony Klink was especially critical: "DeRance wanted to completely control the education at the schools; we cannot possibly allow their control of our schools."⁵³⁹

DeRance did maintain a scholarship fund for Messmer that provided \$8,770 worth of assistance for students, but beyond this, he had very loose ties to both the archdiocese and the school itself.⁵⁴⁰ It is not known why he chose to purchase the school; his only response was "I just felt it was deplorable that such a center of Catholic culture and education would disappear. Moreover, it's a beautiful school with a splendid location. To have that wonderful old school close seemed too great a tragedy."⁵⁴¹

Certainly, the private philanthropy is important to Messmer's survival but there are several important questions surrounding the issue of the school's closing: Why, if the school was so important to the community, was the community not represented to a

⁵³⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, 27 April, 1986.

⁵³⁸ *Milwaukee Journal*, 31 October, 1984.

⁵³⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, 8 May, 1982.

⁵⁴⁰ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 13 December, 1984.

⁵⁴¹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 6 November, 1984.

greater degree? The Save Messmer Committee was comprised mostly of white board members and families who had been at the school for years, and even these 'Messmer Families' were thinly represented. Certainly, a true representation of the school community would include several African-American alumni, parents, and community members. Further, why did the DeRance wait until *after* the school closed to contribute the funds needed? Finally, did John consider the future consequences of making a one-time gift that did not include provisions for operating or maintenance expenses?

It is clear that the only choice Archbishop Weakland had was to close the school. The Archdiocese could not afford to continue to subsidize a school that was failing both financially and academically, had a contentious board of directors, and had uneven administration. Certainly, the enrollment decline and increase in operating expenses provided sound basis for closing the school, but the problems with the school's accreditation, an inability to keep a principal for more than a school year, and power struggles with the school's self-appointed board were at least as problematic. Closing the school allowed Weakland to direct resources to other, more successful schools and have the overall reputation of the system improve. For Messmer, the fight over the school forced the small core of interested parents, alumni, and board members to focus their exact ideas about what the school should be. When they lost their Archdiocesan affiliation, a number of conflicts were eliminated and allowed the school to create a Catholic community that was not bound by the bureaucratic restraints of the archdiocese. Beyond this, they claimed its new mission was to serve north side students who were not successful in Milwaukee Public Schools, something that was quite similar to the school's initial goal of serving north side Catholics who had no other educational opportunities.

Clearly, the Save Messmer Committee was successful in saving the school, but they did not eliminate the school's problems. In the years that followed, despite its newfound fame, the school still faced significant challenges with its budget, faculty, and accreditation.

The academic offerings of the school were substandard prior to the school's closing and could have been even worse in the immediate years following the reopening due to the lack of archdiocesan oversight. It's also possible that the returning students from Save Messmer families would have been successful anywhere because of family means. Additionally, students who were new to Messmer because they sought as an alternative to MPS may have benefited in the new school because of extremely small class sizes and motivated teachers; this might have offered students more individualized instruction than they may have found in public schools. However, the board was inconsistent in its plans prior to the school's closing; the planned 'specialty school' would have made the school even less focused on a core liberal arts curriculum, and might have been a social justice disaster by encouraging an already marginalized student body to pursue non-academic coursework.

The strong sense of community remained a major feature of Messmer for the students who remained; both the crisis of the eventual closing and the close-knit bond of 'new' Messmerites cannot be overlooked, and the school's success in basketball could only serve to strengthen any other connections. However, a rapidly shrinking enrollment prior to the closing suggests that the community couldn't have been as strong as it has been in earlier decades. Beyond this, much of the new identity came by invoking 'us vs.

them' language, which is especially problematic since the argument was with the same archdiocesan leadership that was responsible for their Christian teachings on Sundays.

Certainly, the school's attitudes toward social justice were reflected in their desire to save a part of the community that came to serve a minority population that grew each year, but the lack of support shown by alumni that had in previous years been very generous in its support of the school is also telling. Further, the lack of any meaningful involvement of any minority parents is especially problematic. The amount of private philanthropy given was relatively small and did not cover operating expenses, so one wonders what DeRance's motivation was for saving this particular school without also securing the means to ensure that it stayed open. Finally, the threadbare existence of the new school practically guaranteed either new teachers with no teaching experience or significantly older teachers who perhaps even came out of retirement. Regardless, these teachers were typically white and female and most new students, especially after the last of the 'old' Messmer students graduated, were black.

As the school began to adjust to its independence and move into a new decade, these concerns would continue to affect the school's ability to provide a solid academic curriculum, a nurturing community, and an inclination toward social justice.

CHAPTER SIX
LET THE STATE PAY ITS SHARE

“Let the state examine our children and if our work is up to the standard required by the state, then in the name of all that is fair and just, let the state pay its share toward the support of our schools. If our work is not satisfactory, we shall not ask the state for compensation.”⁵⁴²



Figure 6.1: Messmer with Gym Addition. Source: Messmer High School

By 1995, Messmer had re-established itself as a viable educational option. Enrollment increased, it began to support its own feeder school, and school leadership had stabilized. By this time, the school had begun an increasingly formal relationship with several groups advocating the use of public funds for individuals attending private schools, and this affiliation led to Messmer being used as an example of both a good Catholic school and an example of the success of school choice programs. Despite this

⁵⁴² Bulletin of the Catholic Educational Association, November 1907, 22. Cited in The Rev. Benjamin J. Blied, *Three Archbishops of Milwaukee*, (Milwaukee: Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1955.)

praise, the school still did not consistently offer the academically rigorous curriculum, nurturing core community, or strong social justice orientation celebrated in *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*.

In many ways, the Messmer of the Nineties bore only a cosmetic resemblance to the school that opened in 1926. Although the school maintained a Catholic association, most of the students were not Catholic and the faculty and staff consisted of lay teachers with the exception of the school's president. A major expansion and renovation was funded by outside donors, and the school had become a notable figure in the Milwaukee voucher movement. The first Archdiocesan high school had become a nominally Catholic school that would welcome students of any background - and needed to do so in order to remain open.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was established in 1990 to allow low-income students who would otherwise enroll in Milwaukee Public schools the opportunity to attend private schools. In addition to income requirements for families, enrollment caps for "choice" students, and payment limits to the schools, Wisconsin Act 336, which was the bill that allowed for the creation of MPCP, also set a few accountability standards for participating schools. While this did not include Messmer originally, the school not only became affiliated with choice groups, it became particularly attractive one because of its association with Governor Tommy Thompson, a major choice advocate.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction maintains some records of compliance to these standards, and for the first time in this study, graduation rates and post-closing enrollment data are available. Additionally, the school's accreditation self-

study is useful to examine the school's curriculum and governance. With this information, it is somewhat easier to examine the extent to which Messmer is academically excellent, fosters a sense of community, and is socially just.

In the mid Nineties, Milwaukee had become a "residentially stable, family oriented, and moderately conservative population that [was] strongly rooted, invested, and interested in area communities."⁵⁴³ Respondents in a 1994 quality of life survey felt that the city compared favorably to other metropolitan areas, despite its negative national image and their belief that conditions were declining. Data from both this survey and the one conducted the following year came from a twenty minute telephone interview of 500 residents chosen from a random sample of residents in the metro Milwaukee and both surveys reflected a "stable but slightly more satisfied and conservative population with strong investment in local communities." Additionally, they believed that local organizations and businesses should feel obligated to contribute to solving community problems.⁵⁴⁴ Respondents indicated that "their communities and especially their neighborhoods provided them with a high quality of life"⁵⁴⁵ Despite this belief, though, 67% of all area residents believed that the city was segregated.⁵⁴⁶ Overall, the percentage of Catholics in Milwaukee, 30%, remained about the same from 1990-2000.⁵⁴⁷

Businesses and industry were returning to the area, and in 2000, the Riverworks Business Improvement District was formed as a way for businesses to fund improvements just east of the school. The businesses agreed to a special tax assessment

⁵⁴³ 1995 MDI Metro Quality of Life Report: Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Prepared by Management Decisions, Inc. March, 1995.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ 1994 MDI Metro Quality of Life Report: Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Prepared by Management Decisions, Inc. March, 1994 .

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁴⁷ David M. Cheney, "Archdiocese of Milwaukee" www.catholic-hierarchy.org. Accessed 18 October, 2007.

that would allow spending for neighborhood beautification, security, and other expenses that would help to attract and retain both employees and customers.⁵⁴⁸

At Messmer, even though the school had made a successful transition from Archdiocesan to private oversight, its administration was still preoccupied with the same concerns: meeting expenses, boosting enrollment, and retaining quality faculty.

Weakland said that despite a strong and vocal opposition to the closing of Messmer, there were no long-term hostilities directed toward him. Further, because he was the public face of the Archdiocese, he believed was the necessary recipient of that anger.

Messmer began an extensive renovation and expansion in the mid-Nineties, and in the November of 1999, the Tommy G. Thompson Athletic center was dedicated. In addition to building a new gymnasium, locker room facilities, and administrative offices, the entire school was renovated to include wheelchair access, elevator upgrades, improved classrooms, and the expansion of the music and art classrooms.⁵⁴⁹ This massive undertaking cost \$8.2 million and was funded through private philanthropy led by Michael Cudahy.⁵⁵⁰



Figure 6.2: Dedication of Thompson Athletic Center. Source: Messmer High School

⁵⁴⁸ *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. 17 August, 1999.

⁵⁴⁹ Messmer High School "ISACS Self-Study Report" Spring 2000, 11, 59.

⁵⁵⁰ *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 16 September, 1999.

The school ended its reaccreditation self-study in 2000, and their concluding remarks in reaccreditation self study indicate that the faculty and staff were committed to building 'a good Catholic school,' and they even presented their goals in the same order as Bryk, Lee, and Holland.

As we look forward, the focus on a rigorous academic curriculum will intensify to offer solid preparation for the demands of higher education. The will to succeed has not faded and the desire to improve to even greater levels is strong...The commitment to a school family will continue even as enrollment numbers rise because it is through a hands-on personal approach from teachers, staff, and administrators that the students will be able to connect the world, academic, emotional, and spiritual skills for the future, and a strong sense of personal and civic purpose.⁵⁵¹

However, the extent to which the school achieves these goals appears to be as incomplete as it was in earlier decades.

By 2001, Messmer High School appeared to be stronger than it had been in years. When the school reopened in the fall of 1984, the 135 students and 15 teachers did not probably did not expect the school to remain open. Times were difficult in the first few years, and students were aware of many of the financial challenges. Within a few years of opening, however, the school acquired a core administration and faculty who remained at the school and began to build continuity and, presumably, shared goals.

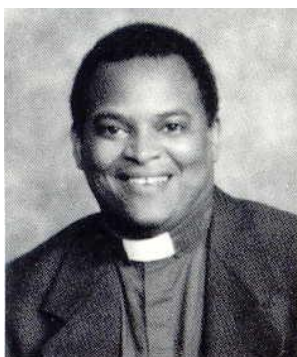


Figure 6.3: Brother Bob Smith. Source: Messmer High School

⁵⁵¹ Messmer High School "ISACS Self-Study Report" Spring 2000, 61.

The 2000-2001 administration team had been in place for at least fifteen years, and the school was financially stable. Br. Bob Smith quickly realized the value of good publicity, and within a year of his placement as principal, he secured a \$50,000 grant for a state of the art computer lab that required the school to generate \$70,000 of its own funds.⁵⁵² His willingness to open the school to alumni and the community led to the increase in outside donations and grants that allowed the school to begin its multi-million dollar renovation.

In 2000, tuition was \$3000, the lowest of all Milwaukee Catholic high schools. Over half the students (258 of 462) participated in the Milwaukee Parental School Choice Program, and additional tuition assistance was available from other sources including the Tuition Assistance Program and Partners for Advancing Values in Education. Beyond this, free and reduced-price lunches were available to eligible students, and the school received Federal funding through the Title I and Chapter IV programs.⁵⁵³ With a large majority of students receiving multiple forms of financial aid, it is clear that the school still required a great deal of outside assistance. The sources of that assistance, however, were generally not made public.

One of the school's major benefactors is the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, a highly conservative philanthropic organization based in Milwaukee. Between 1989 and 2001, the foundation made 34 separate grants totaling \$2,343,000. The grants were, among other things "to support general operations," "to support student scholarships," "challenge grants," and "to support various projects."⁵⁵⁴ Many of these

⁵⁵² *Milwaukee Journal*, 14 July, 1984.

⁵⁵³ Messmer High School "ISACS Self-Study Report" Spring 2000, 57.

⁵⁵⁴ Media Transparency "Grants to M.H.S. d/b/a Messmer Catholic Schools, Inc." www.mediatransparency.org Access 1 March, 2010.

grants were unpublicized; however, challenge grants such as \$150,000 that was given to the school in 1992 when it raised \$300,000 and a \$2,000 grant for the purchase of computer software received a great deal of attention.⁵⁵⁵ Brother Bob Smith is a member of the foundation's board of directors.⁵⁵⁶

Academic Excellence

Messmer regained accreditation through the Independent Schools Association of the Central States after North Central advised the school that they would not commit to the reaccreditation process.⁵⁵⁷ This is almost certainly due to the poor condition of the school at the time of its closing. In 1998, Messmer was able to regain its affiliation with the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and, in 1999, expand to include its own feeder school, Messmer Preparatory, on the grounds of the St. Mary Czestochowa parish.⁵⁵⁸ This association allows Messmer to create the shared organizational beliefs, a consistency of mission, and religious activities that are consistent through all twelve grades - all hallmarks of Bryk, Lee, and Holland's ideal Catholic school community.

By the mid 1990's, enrollment at the high school was no longer a major concern. The 1994 enrollment was 287, but the school continued to grow.⁵⁵⁹ In fact, the school ultimately set class size limits and maintained a waiting list of accepted students who were unable to enroll because these limits had been not only met but exceeded. These numbers are deceptive, however, because the school could not maintain the fall enrollment numbers even with new admissions entering midyear, for an entire academic year. For example, in the 1997-1998 school year, there were 64 seniors in the fall but of

⁵⁵⁵ Milwaukee *Sentinel*, 6 June, 1992, Milwaukee *Journal*, 6 January, 1991.

⁵⁵⁶ Media Transparency

⁵⁵⁷ Jackie Veith, interview by author, audio recording, Milwaukee, WI, 27 October, 2003.

⁵⁵⁸ www.messmerhigh.org

⁵⁵⁹ *Expanded School Choice in Milwaukee*. Wisconsin Policy Research Institute Report. July 1995. 8(5) p.20.

these, only 45 graduated.⁵⁶⁰ This is a significant amount of attrition, both in terms of overall enrollment and in terms of a loss to a single graduating class. While it is not known whether these students left Messmer for another school or left school altogether, this figure does conflict with Bryk, Lee, and Holland's assertion that Catholic schools produce a higher percentage of graduates compared to public schools.⁵⁶¹ At any rate, the inability of the school to graduate the students it admits is appalling. Additionally, this lack of progress could indicate a violation of MPCP performance standards for schools.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Enrollment</u>	<u>Graduates</u>
97-98	306	45
98-99	354	59
99-00	463	58
00-01	502	46

Table 6.1: Enrollment and Graduates. Source: Wisconsin DPI

The admissions department "seeks to promote the mission of Messmer High School by seeking out and admitting students of academic ability, moral integrity, diverse racial and cultural experiences, and varied religious and socioeconomic backgrounds." They recruit from "underserved areas" and consider all areas of a student's academic and personal record, a violation of regulations for admission of Choice students, which stipulate that only income and residency can be considered. Inability to pay tuition was rarely a problem for accepted students; in addition to other forms of financial aid, a tuition assistance program (TAP) allowed students and their families to work for

⁵⁶⁰ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Private School Report PI 1207.

⁵⁶¹ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 273.

Messmer to pay some of their tuition.⁵⁶² There were no remedial courses or any services provided for students with special needs, so students performing below grade level were rarely able to catch up. This certainly contributes both to the number of students who are unable to graduate and challenges the social justice mission of the school.

Messmer appeared to have a college preparatory curriculum. Seniors needed a minimum of 24.5 credits to graduate and students in grades 9-11 were required to take 7 classes per semester. Required classes include four years of English, three years of math, four years of theology, a writing and speech class, and two years of one foreign language. The three-year requirements for science and math coursework meant that graduates would meet admissions requirements for most colleges and universities. There was also one Advanced Placement course in History and a "college level" calculus course. There were limited elective offerings and usually only one level of instruction per subject. Although the results were not made public, students were tested regularly. Incoming students took placement exams and all students took the Iowa Basics. Sophomores took the PLAN, Junior were expected to take the PSAT, and seniors were expected to take the SAT or ACT.⁵⁶³ The school's self-proclaimed college preparatory curriculum was more similar to the liberal arts curriculum than in years past, but according to faculty, there was a relative lack of attention to rigor due to the lack of resources for students performing both above and below expectations.⁵⁶⁴

In its self-study, the school acknowledged that faculty retention was still problematic, making continuity in course offerings extremely difficult. Perhaps the largest reason for faculty turnover was the average starting salary of \$23,000 and the lack

⁵⁶² Messmer High School "ISACS Self-Study Report" Spring 2000, 16.

⁵⁶³ Messmer High School "ISACS Self-Study Report" Spring 2000.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

of a formal salary schedule.⁵⁶⁵ By contrast, the average (non-starting) salary for a teacher in MPS in 2000 was \$42,736.⁵⁶⁶ Teachers were expected to maintain regular contact with parents even though their preparation time was extremely limited due to the expectation that all teachers would serve on committees, moderate extracurricular activities, and serve additional supervision duties. This is a common expectation for teachers in other Catholic schools.⁵⁶⁷ Teachers tended to be either close to retirement or new to teaching, so it is not uncommon for older teachers to either retire or return to retirement and newer teachers to teach for a few years to gain experience and confidence and move to another school (where they would almost certainly earn a larger salary) or leave teaching. In most cases, though, this reflects less than optimal quality of the teaching staff because most do not see the job as a permanent position.

The school's guidance department consisted of one full-time and one part time counselor and a full time counseling intern. Because of the way the students were divided, it was possible that a student might have a different counselor each year. Guidance personnel were expected to advise students on college options, provide academic support, offer resources for job-skills training, and assist students with any personal problems they might have. Maintaining any individual instructional plan for students with special needs was virtually impossible, and the staff was overwhelmed with the academic, social, and emotional needs of the students.⁵⁶⁸

Similarly, the school library was ill-equipped to provide students all of the services they needed. The "instructional media center" contained 4,000 volumes, a few

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Teacher Salary.

⁵⁶⁷ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 136.

⁵⁶⁸ Messmer High School "ISACS Self-Study Report" Spring 2000, 38-39.

computers for student use, and several media players available for teachers to use in their classrooms. There were also over a hundred VHS tapes available for checkout. By comparison, for the state of Wisconsin, the minimum acceptable standard of total volumes is 8,000 and around 6.5 video files available per student.⁵⁶⁹ Students could use the library from a half hour before classes began until a half hour after school. Because there was only one librarian and no additional faculty coverage, the library was closed for the half hour period in which the librarian took lunch. Working computers were often difficult to find, students and teachers alike failed to take advantage of the few resources available, and the budget did not allow for many new purchases, such as a printing station for students.⁵⁷⁰

For the first time in nearly two decades, there were plenty of students. In all grade levels, there were more female students than male students. While freshmen and sophomores typically showed a slightly greater female-male ratio, the gap became much more pronounced in the students' senior year, when significantly more girls graduated.⁵⁷¹ This, along with the number of courses Messmer required students to take, contradicts Bryk, Lee and Holland's assertion that girls were less likely to take mathematics and science classes.⁵⁷² At Messmer, some upper-level mathematics classes were taken only by girls.

Even though there were usually fewer male students to begin with, Messmer appears to have done a poor job of retaining male students. This disparity is not unique - overall MPS graduation rates for the same four year period shown below were 59% for

⁵⁶⁹ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Library Standards.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁷¹ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Private School Report PI 1207.

⁵⁷² Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 200.

girls and 49% for boys.⁵⁷³ However, with such a large discrepancy in such a small student body, a school with a social justice orientation should have some program in place to help all of the students who are admitted complete their high school education.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Seniors in Fall</u>	<u>Female Graduates</u>	<u>Male Graduates</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
97-98	64	27	18	70
98-99	61	37	22	96
99-00	67	35	23	86
00-01	77	27	19	60

Table 6.2: Messmer graduates, 1997-2001. Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

In the four-year span shown in Table 6.2, there is a significant difference in number of fall seniors who graduated with their classes, and the declining percentages suggest that 1997-1998 was an atypically good year.

Interestingly, the school never claimed to be academically excellent. Their philosophy and mission statement, as presented in its accreditation self-study, said that they "strive to develop the whole person spiritually, academically, socially, emotionally, and physically in order to promote community understanding, interaction and responsibility." Their primary goal was a "mission of faith" and then an "educational effort" that gave opportunities to "help the student acquire knowledge and skills necessary to live in society today; teach individuals to think clearly, logically, and critically; inspire Christian leadership and service with others; and appreciate the multiplicity of social, cultural, and religious heritages." There is only superficial mention of curriculum; the entire statement uses "academic" twice and "knowledge" and

⁵⁷³ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. High School Completion.

"intellect" once.⁵⁷⁴ By contrast, Milwaukee Pius has "a rigorous learning environment" in its three sentence mission statement. While this doesn't reflect the content of the curriculum, it does reflect the institutional attitude toward its students' learning.

This statement of purpose, goals, and philosophy was repeated in most printed material distributed by the school. It could be found in "admissions material, student handbooks, student folders, the employee manual, and other publications sent to the community, media, and alumni." There was also a private "statement of shared philosophy" that did mention academic excellence, although this excellence also included preparation for life and work. The statement of attainable goals makes absolutely no mention at all of preparation for college or the academic curriculum other than "the ability to think clearly, logically, and critically."⁵⁷⁵

Community

The school still focused on its self-celebrated "community", although its links to alumni and the local community appear weak. The "ongoing rapport" with alumni seems to be maintained through a newsletter. Marketing and other forms of communication with both the school's neighbors and potential students were delivered through mailings and advertisements in *The Catholic Herald*. The development team did make face to face contact with potential students in school visits to most private elementary and middle schools, and it hosted two open houses each year.⁵⁷⁶

The school offered a total of 37 extracurricular activities in 2000. This self-proclaimed "wide variety" includes all athletics, clubs, and activities such as the school newspaper and yearbook. Despite being an official club and having a class period

⁵⁷⁴ Messmer High School "ISACS Self-Study Report" Spring 2000.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

dedicated to its production, the newspaper was rarely published. Students were expected to participate in at least one activity; faculty were required to moderate one. Forty percent of faculty moderated more than one extracurricular.⁵⁷⁷ This certainly added to the strain that Bryk, Lee, and Holland noted in Catholic school faculty: small school sizes combined with limited financial resources make this a necessity.⁵⁷⁸

The expectation that parents serve as active and enthusiastic volunteers and fundraisers without any real role in operations is typical of most Catholic schools, and Messmer was no different.⁵⁷⁹ Despite the lack of any parent organization, parents were expected to be very involved at Messmer. They were "expected" to work 20 volunteer hours, attend all parent/guardian meetings and conferences, and raise \$300 annually.⁵⁸⁰ The distinction between "expected" and "required" is important; MPCP regulations do not permit schools to require fundraising or volunteer work for Choice families.

As a part of the self-study, school climate was measured by surveys given to students, faculty, staff, and administrators, and although no sample surveys or responses were provided in the self-study, Messmer claimed to have a "welcoming and caring" environment, positive school spirit, and "positive" faculty and administration. The religious atmosphere of the school which had previously been regarded as a focal point of the school's identity, was no longer present despite a four year requirement for theology classes. In fact, the only full time theology instructor was a layman; the remainder of the part time theology faculty were also lay. Additionally, Messmer no longer offered

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 142.

⁵⁷⁹ Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, 306.

⁵⁸⁰ Messmer High School "ISACS Self-Study Report" Spring 2000.

Masses on a regular basis.⁵⁸¹ Instead, there were twice-weekly 'prayer services.' These 10-15 minute programs, usually related to the school's annual spiritual theme were led by regular faculty, who were required to plan at least one program each year. These nominal connections to religious climate that may not have even been identifiably Catholic reflect a remarkably casual institutional attitude toward religion, something that just a few years earlier had been one of the most commonly cited reasons for attending Messmer.

Social Justice

Students were expected to be active outside of school as well because "Messmer was one of the forces that pressed the School Choice debate and helped successfully change education in Milwaukee."⁵⁸² Part of this success, the school claims, its students' involvement in community programs such as House of Peace and Black Achievers as well as its access to and involvement in academic programs such as Upward Bound and InRoads, its mentorship from other schools and organizations, and scholarship programs from Marian College, Ripon College, and Marquette University.⁵⁸³ The access to these programs was probably not exclusive to Messmer graduates and there is no information regarding the success of Messmer graduates at these universities, so the connection of these programs to both the school itself and the school choice program is misleading at best.

Another survey was given to a "random sampling" of students to evaluate gender and diversity issues at Messmer. Their nonspecific and undocumented findings indicated that "although responses were less than favorable in some areas, the overall climate of the school remains favorable." The school believed it had an integrated administrative team

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Messmer High School "ISACS Self-Study Report" Spring 2000.

⁵⁸³ Messmer High School "ISACS Self-Study Report" Spring 2000.

but acknowledged that diversity was a problem for both faculty, which was nearly all white and mostly female and for the almost entirely African-American student body. Despite the greater number of female graduates, students "overwhelmingly" agreed that boys and girls had an equal chance to succeed.

Even though Messmer does not fully represent the celebrated notion of the good Catholic school, it did make remarkable progress in just fifteen years. Because the school was hemorrhaging cash, in danger of losing its accreditation, and rapidly losing students, the archbishop really had no choice but to close the school in 1984. Doing so allowed the archdiocese to keep its unblemished record of highly successful schools, clear a huge debt load, and tighten its system by establishing a relatively homogenous racial and socioeconomic student base. The only real damage done was to Archbishop Weakland's personal reputation, but this quickly passed.

For Messmer, though, the victory seems less clear. Obviously, the Save Messmer Committee won a tremendous battle that yielded both political and moral rewards. They proved correct their belief that the school could survive as an integrated, coed Catholic school; they gained the autonomy they sought as the new Board of Directors; and they will long celebrate themselves as the group of committed visionaries who refused to let the school die. Finally, the DeRance Foundation, itself immersed in extensive controversy, was able to relieve some of the intense scrutiny it was experiencing by making a substantial local philanthropic gesture.

There were significant changes since the school first opened its doors in 1926: new roads and buildings surround a school building that, thanks to additions and renovations rivals contemporary constructions; the ethnic and cultural population in its

surrounding community became dramatically different from the earlier Polish and German Catholics; and the once overwhelming Catholic presence in Milwaukee was smaller, quieter, and significantly less influential. However, much remained the same with Messmer. Although it was not free from controversy, it continued to inspire powerful, if not completely rational, feelings of loyalty from its students and staff. The halls and classrooms, still with original tile and woodwork, seemed to echo with the school's rich history. What was different was Messmer celebrating its early involvement in the Milwaukee Parental Choice movement and being used as a model for other cities across the nation beginning to implement school voucher programs. It is important, though, to scrutinize this model; although there was a much larger enrollment, the school does not appear to offer quality academic programs that were viable alternatives to a failing public school system. Further, the school did not offer the strong Catholic doctrine that was an essential part of the school's early years and a component of the values-based programs of instruction that were popular with conservative educational reformers. Most importantly, the school could not graduate the students it enrolled as freshmen.

The revival of Messmer High School challenges the traditional view of both Catholic churches and schools as belonging to a tightly woven, homogenous community; the most ardent supporters of the school do not live in the area, do not send their children to the school, and do not even visit the school on a regular basis. Certainly, as operating costs increased and community demographics changed, many of the older Catholic schools were closed. In Milwaukee, a once overwhelming Catholic presence has diminished as urban neighborhoods have become home to new, traditionally non-

Catholic groups of ethnic and cultural minorities. It also comes as no surprise that school closings elicit powerful emotions from those who belong to their extended communities. However, despite opposition, these schools are almost always closed. What is surprising is the swift and forceful organization, virtually without precedent, of the handful of alumni, parents, students, and neighborhood residents and the generosity of the socially and politically conservative DeRance foundation that resulted in Messmer actually managing to reopen as an independent school the next academic year.

Perhaps it is this unlikely partnership, combined with the schools longstanding reputation as a solid, reliable neighbor and a timely association with a rising political movement supporting school choice that allowed the school to survive beyond its 1984 closing. And perhaps that success allowed Messmer to be viewed over time as an academically excellent, socially just school with a strong and nurturing school community even though those traits are not always present.

Without question, Messmer is both a participant in and a beneficiary of the ongoing mythology of 'the good Catholic school.' In terms of academic excellence, Messmer did offer a competitive curriculum and had the capacity to deliver a quality education for all of its students, especially in its first four decades. Until the Seventies, Messmer was a good school. However, from the point of its closing until 2001 - due in part to significant academic failings - Messmer cannot be considered academically excellent. The school did improve in the late Nineties, perhaps due to increased State accountability and its own efforts to renew its accreditation, but it did not represent a substantial improvement over the public school system.

Similarly, Messmer most clearly demonstrated a strong, nurturing school

community in the years before 1970. Changes in local demographics and Church doctrine can partially explain this decline. Interestingly, the celebrated "community" that saved the school in 1984 really amounted to just a handful of parents and alumni and one very generous donor. The vibrant, cheerful clubs, teams, and active student organizations that were found in the Forties and Fifties were simply not present in the Eighties and Nineties.

Of the three ideals identified by Bryk, Lee, and Holland, social justice seems the least present over time. This is due more to the fact that for the majority of its history, Messmer was much more closely aligned with a Christian concept of charity that is simply not analogous to the activist orientation that is discussed in *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. Prior to its closing, Messmer clearly exhibited an awareness of inequality and a willingness to help individuals, especially as it related to a Catholic mission. The "new" Messmer, reopened in the era that Bryk, Lee, and Holland most celebrate, had little evidence of either a faith-based call to charity or a secular drive to act to improve society.

Over time, then, it is fair to say that Messmer was a good Catholic school. However, it is less accurate to say that it is representative of an ideal Catholic school. Most interesting here is that the time period in which the school most closely met the ideal came at a time when Catholic education was least celebrated. The modern celebration of Messmer itself began at a time when the school least represented these features.

What remains to be seen is how Messmer will approach the goals of Bryk, Lee and Holland as the school moves forward. It is likely that the predominant cultural and

ethnic majority of student enrollment that will change again, either from the school actively recruiting Latino students in order to maintain enrollment and reconnect to students with a Catholic identity or from a new wave of urban migration. Changes in archdiocesan leadership could affect the degree to which the school reflects its religious identity and implements new curricular trends. Private schools have become subject to increased amounts of public scrutiny and accountability to state agencies, which should cause the school to be more attentive to the academic achievement and needs of its students. Finally, as Milwaukee continues to face racial, economic, and cultural segregation, the school must consider its response not only to its faculty and students but also its own ability to maintain its physical and symbolic place on the corner of 8th and Capitol Drive.