

for a week, you'd never guess that Chicago had one of the largest Catholic archdioceses in the world. On the academic front, literature anthologies rarely include major Christian writers. In most textbooks there cannot be found even one essay, short story, or poem by G.K. Chesterton, the pre-eminent Catholic writer of the twentieth century. The deliberate eclipse of a Christian presence in the media and in academia (or a negatively biased coverage of that presence) is all that atheistic humanism really needs to dominate the marketplace of ideas.

As the atheist population swells, its growing energy may be organized and given direction by its boldest leaders. But human nature abhors a vacuum; the absolutes of

good and evil will not *both* be denied. Refuse God His throne and a grinning devil will claim it. Yet because atheism disowns the dearest of human hopes, it is doubtful that atheists could ever mount a wildly successful appeal to the general population. Perhaps the greater danger, at present, is the rise of a universal agnosticism, the view that whether or not God exists is of no real importance and is a mere distraction to a world that wants to slip ever more deeply into the warm muck of hedonism. But should atheism triumph among our politicians, as it did among the politicians of ancient Rome, Voltaire's caution that atheist senators "ruined the republic" becomes a grim prospect for us all. n

IN PRAISE OF RAPS ON THE KNUCKLES

Richard & Elizabeth Gerbracht

Requiem for the Tiger Nuns

When the tiresome complaint arose again recently on a television program about the nuns of yesteryear hitting Catholic schoolchildren on the knuckles with a ruler, we undertook a nostalgic time trip back to the days when we sat in such nuns' classrooms. When we were in eighth grade, one of us was laughing uncontrollably at the antics of a fellow student and was hit for it. The knuckle-rap was entirely deserved. Neither of us has ever felt any anger toward the nuns, then or now. At the time, it didn't occur to us that the nuns were following the lead of Aristotle, who understood the value of a little discipline. Now, with some maturity, we recognize that this was an assertive teaching method that produced *results*.

We remember how the nuns prepared us for confir-

mation. Day after day leading up to the event, our entire eighth-grade class was directed to an assembly area, where we stood in formation in several rows, well spaced so the nun could walk between us, stand directly in front of us, or behind us. The nun would reach into her habit and pull out the *Baltimore Catechism*. We knew she would question each of us in order, but we didn't know which question she would ask — we had to know the answer to every one!

It was the same for math and English: memorize the tables and the rules, diagram sentences, and be ready for a test. The slow learners were ordered to stay after school or to come to school an hour early the next day. The nun would line up these slackers along the side wall of the classroom and drill them one at a time. Those who didn't catch on soon realized they'd never pass to the next grade; sometimes the nun threatened to take a poor performer back to a lower grade classroom that very moment! The kids quickly shaped up and applied themselves to learning in order to avoid the humiliation. It was an iron-fisted approach and it worked.

The Catholic high schools we attended were single-sex institutions — boys attended boys' schools; girls at-

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tended girls' schools. One of the reasons for the separation was the difficulty of disciplining boys. In one boys' school, the assistant headmaster, a priest, was heard to say, "If we didn't have the nuns, we couldn't keep discipline."

In light of the current debate over American versus Chinese teaching methods, borne in large part from Amy Chua's bestselling memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, it seems only appropriate to christen the tough-as-nails, ruler-wielding nuns of the twentieth century "Tiger Nuns." They were not vicious, man-eating tigers but lovable tigers — though they were demanding and effective. In our comparison of the major differences between Chinese and American teaching styles, we found that a number of the Chinese approaches are strikingly similar to the methods used by the nuns who taught us.

More significant than the nuns' rulers was what they accomplished in teaching us. Up until the mid-1960s the Tiger Nuns told the students what they *must* learn. Contrast this with the "modern" approach, where it seems the students tell the teacher (or decide for themselves) what they want, think they need, or are willing to take away from the available material. Educators believe that the modern method, known as the "facilitator approach," helps build self-esteem in students and develops their thinking, reasoning, and creative abilities. But reasoning to what end — a conclusion arranged to meet the preferences of the reasoner?

Comparing today's teaching methods with how we were taught exposes the catechetical dilution that has led to confusion between generations about the basics of Catholicism. Many older Catholics, observing the faith practices of their children and grandchildren, recognize that their own beliefs are much stronger than the beliefs of later generations. Data from *American Catholics Today*, published in 2007, compares the commitment to the Church of the generation of Catholics born before 1941 with those born after 1979. Among the pre-1941 generation (who attended Catholic schools or parish catechism classes in the 1950s-1960s), 43 percent maintain a "high commitment" to the Church. Of the post-1979 generation, a dismal *zero percent* maintain a "high commitment" to the Church. Why the discrepancy?

Might the shift away from the teaching methods favored by the Tiger Nuns — not to mention the disappearance of the Tiger Nuns themselves from educational institutions — have something to do with it? It seems that the old rap on the knuckles has been replaced by a blow to the brain.

The nuns started teaching in Catholic schools soon

after the founding of our nation. Their numbers grew slowly and steadily, peaking at 104,314 in 1965. But by 2002 that figure plummeted by a staggering 94 percent. The number of parochial grade-school students peaked at nearly 4,500,000 in 1965, but by 2002 had declined by 70 percent. In little over a generation, a magnificent educational edifice collapsed, and a way of religious life all but disappeared.

The total effort and results of the work of the Tiger Nuns contributed immeasurably to the steady growth of Catholicism and the development of our country. In one community after another, individual stories of incredible resourcefulness and creativity in the building of schools, curricula, and convents; the recruiting of more nuns; and, often against great odds, the raising of money to repeat the process over and over can be found in John Fialka's book *Sisters*. It is a moving account of the ingenuity of nuns throughout America in their determination to pass along the faith.

How do we measure the loss of the Tiger Nuns, their productivity and accomplishments? About forty years after graduating from a Catholic high school, we sent questionnaires to every classmate, now living in 22 states, asking for their opinions about discipline. Our unscientific survey was undertaken totally independent from the school, yet 60 percent of the class responded. Some questions and answers were as follows:

Q: We faced a lot of discipline in high school; at the time did you feel the discipline was oppressive, overdone, or too tough? **A:** Yes 5%; No 95%.

Q: If you answered no, how did you feel about the discipline at the time? **A** (typical answers): "Necessary extension of discipline of parents." "It was appropriate, fair, required." "Adequate and good for my future." "Without discipline other values erode." "Helped me for tough decisions in the work arena." "Matured me for life, taught me respect."

Q: Looking back, do you think the discipline was good for you and for your development? **A:** Yes 98%; No 0%; N/A 2%.

Q: Do you believe that more discipline in high schools today would help make for better lives in the future? **A:** Yes 96%; No 1%; N/A 3%.

Q: In general, do you



think that today's young family is as strong in basic beliefs and discipline as your parents' family when you were in high school? **A:** Yes 9%; No 84%; N/A 7%.

None of the respondents mentioned fear of the ruler or any excessive disciplinary measures. The class appreciated what the nuns did for them. By and large, the class bemoaned the absence of strong discipline today: "No more nuns or priests" (in the schools); "Lack of values, loss of virtues"; "Parents' poor attitude"; "Not enough attention of parents."

In the world today, China and other Asian nations consistently turn out the best-educated students. In 2007 the U.S. education system ranked a dismal 14th in reading skills, 17th in science, and 25th in math among 34 countries (not including China). Yet there is still consid-

erable debate about which system is best — theirs or ours.

Recently, we went back to our eighth-grade classrooms, located in two cities 100 miles apart. The schools are still in operation but, save for a single exception, the nuns are gone. In today's educational, spiritual, and cultural malaise, we sorely miss the Tiger Nuns. They didn't teach for money; they didn't teach for retirement benefits; they didn't teach for an easy life. They taught in poverty; they taught for the love of God; and we, their students, benefited. Imagine how different our nation would be today, imagine the strengths the Catholic Church would enjoy, if the Tiger Nuns' single-minded dedication to strict and effective education had carried forward into the present.

Requiescant in pace.

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VITAL WORKS RECONSIDERED, #28

Mitchell Kalpakgian

Elemental & Sophisticated Evil

Billy Budd. By Herman Melville.

In his posthumously published novella *Billy Budd*, Herman Melville depicts two types of evil that, at first blush appear, to have nothing in common. On the one hand, he presents Claggart, the malicious master-at-arms on board the ship *Bellipotent*. It is Claggart who,

motivated by jealousy, accuses Billy Budd of mutiny — an outright, unfounded lie that provokes a reflexive blow from Budd's fist that kills Claggart, a capital crime under military law that forbids a sailor from striking his superior in a time of war at sea. Budd, a dutiful, competent shipmate called "the handsome sailor" and "my best man" by his former commander, epitomizes purity of heart and moral integrity. He exudes health, beauty, and manliness as he befriends all the shipmates with his "genial, happy-go-lucky air." A peacemaker by reputation, Budd combines noble strength, a good heart, and a clean conscience: "To deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his nature."

Claggart resents Budd's popularity, is repelled by his spotless character, and envies the admiration the sailor receives from all quarters. Budd, however, does not consciously provoke or antagonize Claggart and is unaware of Claggart's vicious hostility toward him. He performs his duties with conscientious diligence and enjoys the camaraderie of his mates: "Not that he preached to them or did

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