

## GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ENROLLMENT TRENDS IN K12 CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: 1975-2018

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Analytics series

### KEY MESSAGES:

- Globally, in 2018, 35.0 million children were enrolled in Catholic schools at the primary level, 19.3 million at the secondary level, 7.3 million at the preschool level, and 6.5 million at the tertiary level.
- Enrollment in Catholic schools more than doubled between 1975 and 2018. Most of the growth in absolute terms as well as in percentage terms from the base was concentrated in Africa. This is not surprising, given that the continent has a high rate of population growth and that thanks to efforts to achieve education for all, enrollment rates have risen substantially, especially at the primary level,

### Introduction

Globally, the Catholic Church estimates that 35.0 million children were enrolled in Catholic primary schools in 2018, with 19.3 million children enrolled in Catholic secondary schools and 7.3 children enrolled at the preschool level (Secretaria Status, 2020). How has the number of students in pre-primary, primary and secondary Catholic schools evolved over the last four decades? In which parts of the world is growth in enrollment taking place, and where do we observe a potential decline? How is enrollment distributed between the pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels? Which are the countries with the largest enrollment in Catholic schools?

To answer these questions, this note provides trends in enrollment in Catholic schools from 1975 to 2018 and discusses some of the implications for the future of Catholic schools. The note updates with the most recent data available an analysis published previously in *Educatio Catholica*, the journal of the Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome (Wodon, 2018)<sup>1</sup>. A separate note in this series considers global and regional trends in enrollment in Catholic higher education.

#### Box 1: Knowledge Notes

**What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website?** The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

**Which topics are covered in the Knowledge Notes Series?** The series explores achievements and challenges for Catholic schools globally, including in terms of enrollment, reach to the poor, academic performance, parental priorities, costs and affordability, and religious education. Interesting innovations are also featured.

**What is the focus of this note?** The note looks at trends in enrollment in pre-primary, primary and secondary Catholic schools globally and by region. Growth has been especially strong over the last few decades in Africa, which has important implications for planning and policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis in Wodon (2018) was shortened for this note.

## Background

In the context of efforts by the international community to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, other faith-based organizations play an important role in the provision of education and health services, and more generally in investments in human capital. Many of these organizations are Christian, and among Christian organizations, in part for historical reasons, Catholic institutions often tend to have the largest networks of schools and healthcare facilities. In the case of healthcare, one prominent example is that of the Christian Health Associations which provide care in many sub-Saharan African countries, and especially in East and Southern Africa (Olivier et al., 2015; Dimmock et al., 2012, 2017). In the case of education, large networks of schools are managed by Catholic dioceses as well as religious orders, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Wodon, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2020a).

When adding schools at the pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels, the Catholic Church provides education to almost 62 million children according to the latest statistical yearbook of the Church (Secretaria Status, 2020). This estimate is likely to be a lower bound because it probably does not (fully) account for the role played by Catholic institutions in providing other education services, such as technical and vocational education and training, as well as informal education services. Overall, the Catholic Church is likely to be one of the largest providers of education services worldwide after the governments of China and India.

The objective of this note is to document long-term trends in the provision of K12 education by the Church. The first mission of Catholic schools is to contribute to the salvific mission of the Church. This requires *“the development of man’s psychological and moral consciousness ... as a pre-condition for the reception of the befitting divine gifts of truth and grace”* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). The Congregation defines a school as a place where integral formation occurs through a living encounter with a cultural inheritance. Given the pluralism that characterizes today’s societies and the fact that many students in Catholic schools are not Catholic, the Congregation for Catholic Education (2017) calls for an education that leads to fraternal humanism and a civilization of love. Ensuring that education is provided ‘in a Catholic key’ is the main objective of Catholic schools (Delfra et al., 2018). But this does not imply that size does not matter. As long as Catholic schools are faithful to their mission, providing education to a larger as opposed to a smaller number of students helps the Church, including in terms of its evangelization mission, which should not be equated to proselytism.

For society at large, a robust network of Catholic schools is also likely to be beneficial in various ways. First, it is

often believed that Catholic schools perform better than public schools in terms of learning outcomes for students, even though the empirical evidence to that effect is mixed. In the United States for example, while some studies suggest better outcomes (Evans et al., 1995; Altonji et al. 2005), others find few differences between Catholic and public schools (Jepsen, 2003; Elder and Jepsen, 2014). In developing countries, the evidence is mixed as well, as shown for example in the case studies in Barrera-Osorio et al. (2009) or the case study for Fe y Alegría schools in Colombia provided by Parra-Osorio and Wodon, 2014).

It should also not be forgotten that in some countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, most Catholic schools are considered as public schools. In Uganda, analysis of learning outcomes suggests that students in public Catholic schools perform at the same level as students in other public Catholic schools, while students in private Catholic schools perform at the same (and higher) level as students in other private schools (Wodon, 2021). Yet, the fact that in many countries there is a strong demand from parents for a Catholic education due to perceptions of high quality cannot be denied and is an indicative sign of excellence broadly defined beyond a sole focus on performance as measured by student assessments.

Catholic schools and the Church also have a long tradition of serving the poor (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004; Francis, 2015; McKinney, 2018). Today, implementing the preferential option for the poor is challenging for many schools. When they receive no or only limited support from the state, the schools must recover operating costs from parents, which may make their service less affordable for the poor. Still, even if Catholic schools are not primarily serving the poor today, they do reach millions of children in poverty, as documented for sub-Saharan Africa by Wodon (2014, 2015, 2019a, 2020b). The schools also generate major savings for state education budgets (Wodon, 2019b).

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Catholic and other faith-based schools provide valuable options for parents, thus contributing to healthy pluralism in the educational choices available to them.

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Finally, Catholic and other faith-based schools provide valuable options for parents, thus contributing to healthy pluralism in the educational choices available to them. An argument can also be made that the schools may contribute to building stronger communities (Brinig and Garnett, 2015) and higher levels of civic participation (Dee, 2005), even if the evidence to that effect remains limited. In these various and other ways, a healthy network of Catholic schools benefits societies as well as the Church, so that it does appear worthwhile to look at trends in enrollment as one measure of the contributions of Catholic schools to education systems and societies.

## Enrollment Trends

Data on the number of students in K12 Catholic schools are available in the Catholic Church's annual statistical yearbooks, with the most recent data available for 2018 (Secretaria Status, 2020). The yearbooks provide data among others on enrollment in K12 schools by level, considering separately nurseries and preschools, primary schools, and secondary schools for each country and some territories. While the data are self-reported by the chancery offices of ecclesiastical jurisdictions that fill the annual questionnaire, the data seem to be of sufficient quality to document broad trends over time. In a typical year, about five percent of the ecclesiastical jurisdictions do not fill the questionnaire, but this is the case mostly for small jurisdictions, so that the missing data should not affect the overall results substantially for most countries, or at the regional and global levels.

Table 1 provides estimates of enrollment for nurseries and preschools, primary schools, and secondary schools, as well as total enrollment for all three levels combined. For primary and secondary schools, data are provided from 1975 to 2018. For nurseries and preschools, the data are not available in the statistical yearbook for 1975, so the series starts in 1980. Estimates are provided by region – as defined in the yearbooks, and globally. As

already mentioned, in 2018, 7.4 million children were enrolled in Catholic nurseries and preschools globally, 35.0 million children attended primary schools, and 19.3 million children attended secondary schools, for a total across the three levels of almost 62 million children.

Figures 1 through 4 provide a visualization of the trends in enrollment by region for five regions: Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania. The analysis is kept at that level to keep the tables manageable, but data are available at the country level in the statistical yearbooks.

A number of interesting findings emerge from the data. Five findings are highlighted here. First, the trends in Figures 1 through 4 suggest healthy growth in enrollment over time. Total enrollment in K12 education more than doubled between 1975 and 2018 globally, from 29.1 million to 61.7 million students. Most of the growth in enrollment in absolute terms was concentrated in Africa, and within that region, in sub-Saharan Africa (not shown in the Table). This is not surprising, given that the continent has a high rate of population growth and that thanks to efforts to achieve education for all, enrollment rates have risen substantially, especially at the primary level, even if gaps remain (UNESCO, 2020).

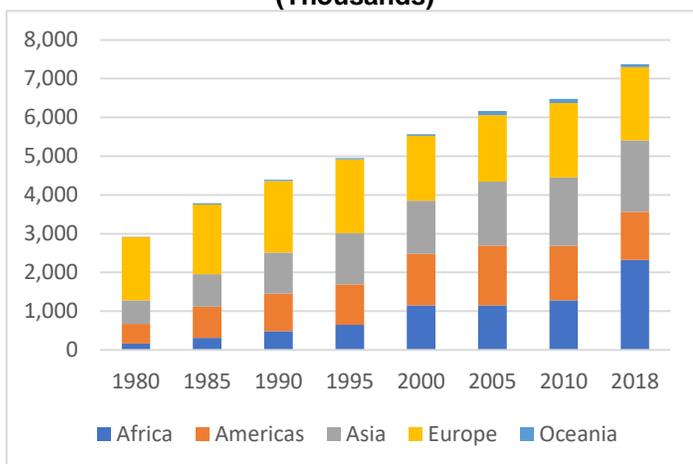
**Table 1: Trends in the Number of Students Enrolled in K12 Catholic Schools (Thousands)**

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2018
<b>Nurseries and Preschools</b>									
Africa	-	162.4	312.5	484.6	646.2	1,147.9	1,149.4	1,277.5	2,327.0
Americas	-	514.0	800.6	968.7	1,042.1	1,331.1	1,541.7	1,409.6	1,235.3
Asia	-	607.0	840.0	1,058.6	1,327.0	1,369.8	1,651.4	1,761.1	1,846.2
Europe	-	1,634.4	1,796.5	1,845.1	1,901.3	1,681.0	1,714.5	1,923.4	1,890.0
Oceania	-	7.6	37.0	33.5	33.9	37.1	109.7	107.0	78.3
<b>World</b>	-	2,925.4	3,786.7	4,390.5	4,950.5	5,566.8	6,166.7	6,478.6	7,376.9
<b>Primary Schools</b>									
Africa	4,221.0	5,610.7	7,052.5	8,393.8	9,356.4	10,158.4	12,435.8	15,821.3	19,365.1
Americas	7,101.5	6,838.6	7,118.2	7,380.6	7,198.3	7,554.7	7,045.0	6,766.0	6,143.7
Asia	3,215.1	3,752.6	3,929.0	4,289.9	4,539.6	4,668.9	4,907.5	5,023.8	5,608.8
Europe	4,552.5	3,979.0	3,810.3	3,569.2	3,607.6	3,099.4	3,003.7	2,846.0	3,126.7
Oceania	493.6	480.3	480.2	510.9	544.1	615.7	692.1	694.0	767.7
<b>World</b>	19,583.7	20,661.2	22,390.3	24,144.5	25,245.9	26,097.1	28,084.1	31,151.2	35,012.0
<b>Secondary Schools</b>									
Africa	599.0	806.5	1,032.4	1,275.2	1,701.7	2,267.1	3,438.1	4,540.9	5,462.8
Americas	2,930.2	3,364.0	3,521.2	3,506.0	3,603.7	3,797.6	3,696.6	3,868.1	3,684.0
Asia	2,607.8	3,150.9	3,720.9	3,982.1	4,134.5	4,017.4	4,985.1	5,292.0	5,993.4
Europe	3,149.2	3,436.0	3,485.0	3,358.3	3,459.2	3,593.8	3,721.2	3,666.4	3,657.7
Oceania	236.0	257.6	306.8	319.3	333.3	350.8	391.1	426.1	509.6
<b>World</b>	9,522.3	11,015.0	12,066.3	12,440.9	13,232.4	14,026.7	16,232.1	17,793.6	19,307.3
<b>Total</b>									
Africa	4,820.0	6,579.6	8,397.4	10,153.6	11,704.3	13,573.4	17,023.4	21,639.8	27,154.8
Americas	10,031.7	10,716.6	11,440.1	11,855.3	11,844.1	12,683.3	12,283.2	12,043.7	11,063.0
Asia	5,822.9	7,510.5	8,489.9	9,330.6	10,001.1	10,056.1	11,544.0	12,076.9	13,448.3
Europe	7,701.7	9,049.3	9,091.8	8,772.6	8,968.1	8,374.3	8,439.4	8,435.8	8,674.5
Oceania	729.7	745.5	824.0	863.7	911.3	1,003.6	1,192.9	1,227.1	1,355.5
<b>World</b>	29,106.0	34,601.5	38,243.3	40,975.9	43,428.9	45,690.6	50,482.8	55,423.4	61,696.2

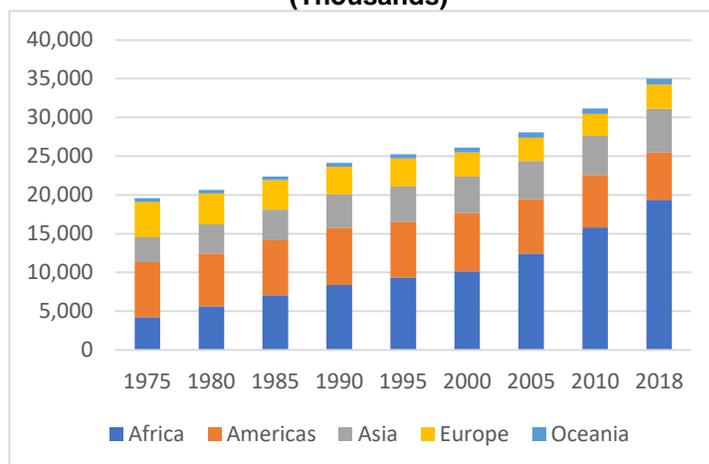
Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

Note: Totals for 1975 are not comparable to subsequent years due to lack of data for nurseries and preschools.

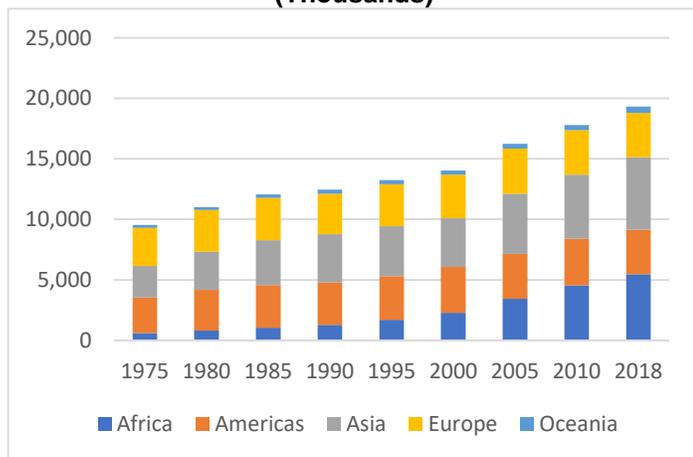
**Figure 1: Enrollment in Catholic Preschools (Thousands)**



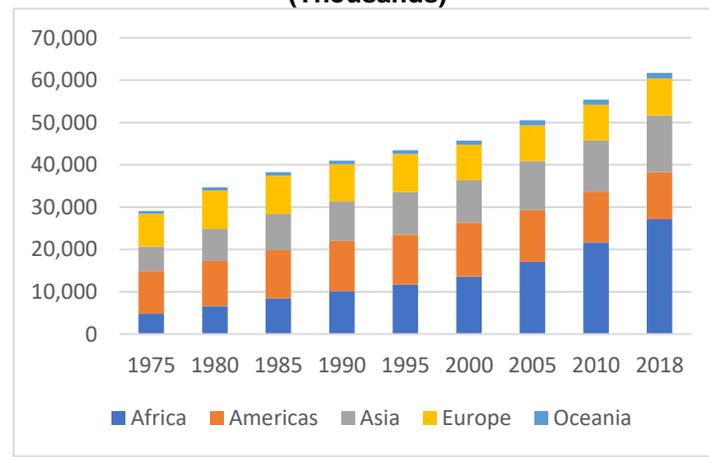
**Figure 2: Enrollment in Catholic Primary Schools (Thousands)**



**Figure 3: Enrollment in Catholic Secondary Schools (Thousands)**



**Figure 4: Total Enrollment in Catholic K12 Schools (Thousands)**



Source: Statistical Yearbooks of the Church.  
 Note: Preschools not included in 1975.

By 2018, the Africa region had 27.2 million children enrolled in Catholic K12 schools. Of those, 19.4 million were enrolled in Catholic primary schools. This accounted for 55 percent of all children enrolled in Catholic schools at that level globally. The numbers of children in Catholic nursery and preschools and in Catholic secondary schools in Africa were estimated in 2018 at respectively 2.3 million and 5.5 million, accounting in both cases for about three in ten children enrolled at those levels in Catholic schools globally. The other region with a large increase in enrollment in absolute terms over the last few decades is Asia, mostly due to gains in India, especially at the secondary level. It is worth noting however that over the last few years, global enrollment in K12 education as levelled off, with even a recent (albeit small) decline. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, there may be a risk that some Catholic schools will have lost students, and some schools may close (Wodon, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e).

The largest gains in enrollment in absolute terms are observed in Africa. This was expected given that high rates of population growth as well as gains in educational attainment in the region over the last few decades.

A second key finding is the fact that there are substantial differences between regions in the share of students enrolled by level (see Table 2 and Figure 5). Globally, primary schools account for 56.7 percent of all enrollment in Catholic schools in 2018, versus 31.3 percent for secondary schools, and 12.1 percent for preschools. In Africa however, primary schools still account for 71.3 percent of total enrollment, mostly because the transition to secondary schools is still weak in many countries (for example, only four in ten students in Africa complete their lower secondary school according to the World Bank's the World Development Indicators). By contrast, in Europe, primary schools account for only a third (36.0 percent) of

total enrollment in Catholic schools. This is due not only to substantial enrollment at the secondary level, but also to high enrollment rates in nurseries and preschools. Globally, there has been a progressive decline in the

share of students enrolled at the primary level globally from 67.3 percent in 1975 to 56.7 percent in 2018.

**Table 2: Proportion of Students Enrolled in K12 Catholic Schools by Level (%)**

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2018
<b>Nurseries and Preschools</b>									
Africa	-	2.5	3.7	4.8	5.5	8.5	6.8	5.9	8.6
Americas	-	4.8	7.0	8.2	8.8	10.5	12.6	11.7	11.2
Asia	-	8.1	9.9	11.3	13.3	13.6	14.3	14.6	13.7
Europe	-	18.1	19.8	21.0	21.2	20.1	20.3	22.8	21.8
Oceania	-	1.0	4.5	3.9	3.7	3.7	9.2	8.7	5.8
<b>World</b>	-	8.5	9.9	10.7	11.4	12.2	12.2	11.7	12.0
<b>Primary Schools</b>									
Africa	87.6	85.3	84.0	82.7	79.9	74.8	73.1	73.1	71.3
Americas	70.8	63.8	62.2	62.3	60.8	59.6	57.4	56.2	55.5
Asia	55.2	50.0	46.3	46.0	45.4	46.4	42.5	41.6	41.7
Europe	59.1	44.0	41.9	40.7	40.2	37.0	35.6	33.7	36.0
Oceania	67.6	64.4	58.3	59.2	59.7	61.4	58.0	56.6	56.6
<b>World</b>	67.3	59.7	58.5	58.9	58.1	57.1	55.6	56.2	56.7
<b>Secondary Schools</b>									
Africa	12.4	12.3	12.3	12.6	14.5	16.7	20.2	21.0	20.1
Americas	29.2	31.4	30.8	29.6	30.4	29.9	30.1	32.1	33.3
Asia	44.8	42.0	43.8	42.7	41.3	40.0	43.2	43.8	44.6
Europe	40.9	38.0	38.3	38.3	38.6	42.9	44.1	43.5	42.2
Oceania	32.4	34.6	37.2	37.0	36.6	35.0	32.8	34.7	37.6
<b>World</b>	32.7	31.8	31.6	30.4	30.5	30.7	32.2	32.1	31.3

Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

Note: Shares for 1975 are not comparable to subsequent years due to lack of data for nurseries and preschools.

A third finding is that in proportionate terms, as a percentage change from the base, the highest growth rates are also observed for Africa, as was the case for absolute gains in enrollment. But growth rates are also high in Asia and Oceania. The annual growth rates for the period from 1975 to 2018 for primary, secondary, and total enrollment, and from 1980 to 2018 for enrollment in nurseries and preschools, are computed taking into account compounding. They are provided in Table 3 and visualized in Figure 6. In Africa, the annual growth rates are estimated at 7.3 percent for nurseries and preschools, 3.6 percent for primary schools, 5.3 percent for secondary schools, and 4.1 percent for total enrollment in K12 Catholic schools. These growth rates are two to three times larger than those observed for enrollment in Catholic schools globally. In Asia, growth rates in Catholic school enrollment are slightly above those observed for the world, at 3.0 percent for nurseries and preschools, 1.3 percent for primary schools, 2.0 percent for secondary schools, and 2.0 percent for total enrollment in K12 Catholic schools.

The highest growth rates in enrollment are also observed for Africa, as for absolute gains in enrollment. But growth rates are also high in Asia and Oceania.

By contrast, in the Americas and in Europe at all levels, growth rates tend to be much smaller, and in some cases are negative. The only exception is the growth in the Americas in enrollment at the nursery and preschool levels. For the Americas, a difference between the United States and the other countries should be noted. While enrollment continues to grow in some countries in Central and Latin America, there has been a steep decline in enrollment in the United States, from more than five million students in primary and secondary schools in the early 1960s to only about 1.8 million today. As noted by Murnane et al. (2018), the decline in enrollment has affected private schools more generally, with the middle class facing increasing difficulties given stagnant wages to afford private schools due to their cost in the absence of state or federal subsidies (in contrast to private schools, charter schools have expanded over time thanks to public funding – these are formally public schools but they are privately managed).

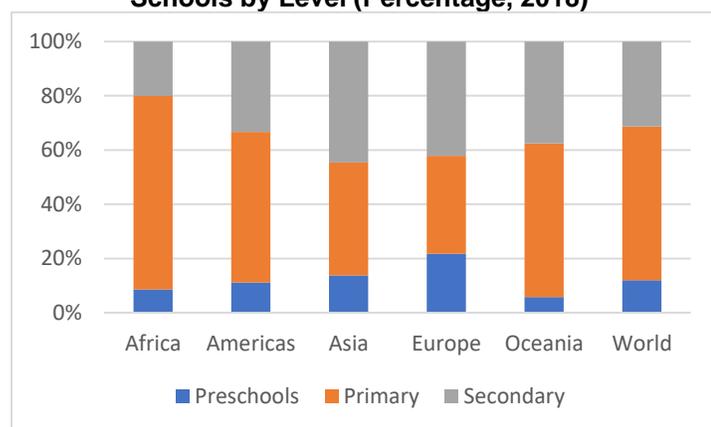
**Table 3: Annual Growth Rate for Enrollment in K12 Catholic Schools (%)**

	1975-1980	1980-1985	1985-1990	1990-1995	1995-2000	2000-2005	2005-2010	2010-2018	1975-2018
<b>Nurseries and Preschools</b>									
Africa		14.0	9.2	5.9	12.2	0.0	2.1	7.8	7.3
Americas		9.3	3.9	1.5	5.0	3.0	-1.8	-1.6	2.3
Asia		6.7	4.7	4.6	0.6	3.8	1.3	0.6	3.0
Europe		1.9	0.5	0.6	-2.4	0.4	2.3	-0.2	0.4
Oceania		37.2	-2.0	0.2	1.8	24.2	-0.5	-3.8	6.3
<b>World</b>		5.3	3.0	2.4	2.4	2.1	1.0	1.6	2.5
<b>Primary Schools</b>									
Africa	5.9	4.7	3.5	2.2	1.7	4.1	4.9	2.6	3.6
Americas	-0.8	0.8	0.7	-0.5	1.0	-1.4	-0.8	-1.2	-0.3
Asia	3.1	0.9	1.8	1.1	0.6	1.0	0.5	1.4	1.3
Europe	-2.7	-0.9	-1.3	0.2	-3.0	-0.6	-1.1	1.2	-0.9
Oceania	-0.5	0.0	1.2	1.3	2.5	2.4	0.1	1.3	1.0
<b>World</b>	1.1	1.6	1.5	0.9	0.7	1.5	2.1	1.5	1.4
<b>Secondary Schools</b>									
Africa	6.1	5.1	4.3	5.9	5.9	8.7	5.7	2.3	5.3
Americas	2.8	0.9	-0.1	0.6	1.1	-0.5	0.9	-0.6	0.5
Asia	3.9	3.4	1.4	0.8	-0.6	4.4	1.2	1.6	2.0
Europe	1.8	0.3	-0.7	0.6	0.8	0.7	-0.3	0.0	0.3
Oceania	1.8	3.6	0.8	0.9	1.0	2.2	1.7	2.3	1.8
<b>World</b>	3.0	1.8	0.6	1.2	1.2	3.0	1.9	1.0	1.7
<b>Total</b>									
Africa	6.4	5.0	3.9	2.9	3.0	4.6	4.9	2.9	4.1
Americas	1.3	1.3	0.7	0.0	1.4	-0.6	-0.4	-1.1	0.2
Asia	5.2	2.5	1.9	1.4	0.1	2.8	0.9	1.4	2.0
Europe	3.3	0.1	-0.7	0.4	-1.4	0.2	0.0	0.3	0.3
Oceania	0.4	2.0	0.9	1.1	1.9	3.5	0.6	1.3	1.5
<b>World</b>	3.5	2.0	1.4	1.2	1.0	2.0	1.9	1.4	1.8

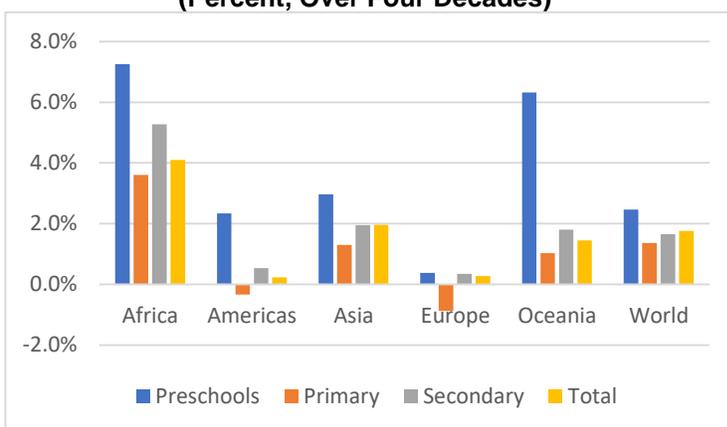
Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

Note: Growth rates for 1975-80 do not include data for nurseries and preschools.

**Figure 5: Proportion of K12 Students in Catholic Schools by Level (Percentage, 2018)**



**Figure 6: Annual Growth Rates in Enrollment (Percent, Over Four Decades)**



Source: Author's estimations from the Statistical Yearbooks of the Church.

Fourth, there is substantial heterogeneity between countries in the size of their Catholic school networks. Table 4 provides the list of the 15 countries with the largest enrollment in K12 Catholic schools in 2018. Estimates of enrollment are provided by level in each country. Together, these 15 countries account for about two thirds of the global enrollment in K12 Catholic schools. As mentioned earlier, enrollment is largest in absolute terms in India due to the sheer size of the

country. The next four countries with the largest enrollment are all sub-Saharan African countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, Kenya, and Malawi. Three of these four countries were classified in 2020 as low-income by the World Bank, which means that they had a level of Gross National Income per capita of \$1,035 or less in 2019. The fourth country, Kenya, as well as India are by contrast a lower-middle income country, the next level in the income classification of the

World Bank. The fact that the footprint of Catholic schools is today especially large in low income countries is a positive development for the mission of the Church to serve low income students. In countries such as the DRC, even households in the second top quintile of income are not “well off” economically by any means.

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In the DRC as well as Uganda, Kenya, and Malawi, most Catholic schools are considered as public schools and are at least partially funded by the state. In the DRC for example, Catholic schools are part of *écoles conventionnées* (Backiny-Yetna and Wodon, 2009; Wodon, 2017). Catholic schools in the DRC have a large market share due in part to historical factors and the limited ability of the state to provide education services during periods of conflict. The smallest country included in Table 4 is Belgium which has high levels of enrollment because of a system that funds (almost) equally Catholic and public schools. But in the other countries, while the number of student enrolled in Catholic schools may be high due to population sizes, the market share of Catholic schools is often low, in large part due to limited or no state support leading to cost recovery from parents by the schools, and thereby higher costs which may not be affordable for the poor. This is for example the case in the United States as well as India.

**Table 4: Top 15 Countries by K12 Enrollment in Catholic Schools, 2018**

	Preschool	Primary	Secondary	Total
India	1,184,522	3,907,185	4,038,841	9,130,548
DR Congo	78,239	4,316,789	1,557,110	5,952,138
Uganda	183,519	4,882,705	450,674	5,516,898
Kenya	413,238	2,673,575	889,294	3,976,107
Malawi	462,791	1,835,418	173,315	2,471,524
France	391,615	630,785	1,134,850	2,157,250
USA	152,753	1,278,673	574,887	2,006,313
Rwanda	193,988	1,140,958	352,564	1,687,510
Spain	237,577	569,872	591,029	1,398,478
Argentina	210,143	635,426	520,749	1,366,318
Philippines	98,760	381,053	798,745	1,278,558
Belgium	197,493	465,302	556,803	1,219,598
Mexico	160,653	533,076	414,472	1,108,201
Ghana	188,622	524,020	289,955	1,002,597
Brazil	183,453	598,126	204,650	986,229

Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

Fifth, the fact that the highest growth rate in enrolment over the last four decades is observed for nurseries and preschools is worth acknowledging. This is good news, not so much in terms of how this may affect future enrolment in Catholic primary or secondary schools, but in terms of the value of nurseries and preschools for the

children attending them. The literature demonstrates that early childhood is a critical period in the life of children and that investments in early childhood development tend to have high returns, and often higher returns than investments later in life. This is the case especially for the first 1,000 days in the life of children when brain development occurs, but also later, including to make sure that children are ready to enter primary school (Black et al., 2017). Early stimulation and preschools have therefore been identified as key interventions that governments as well as other organizations should promote when investing in human development (Denboba et al., 2014).

## Discussion

The purpose of this note was to update a basic analysis of trends in enrollment in K12 Catholic schools published in *Educatio Catholica* with data up to 2016 (Wodon, 2018). All Figures and Tables have been updated to the latest data available from the statistical yearbooks of the Church for 2018. A few additional remarks are worth mentioning.

First, the fact that much of the growth in enrollment in Catholic schools over the last four decades has been observed in low income African countries does not mean that in those countries, Catholic schools succeed in reaching the very poor, even if many of the students they serve are likely to be poor. The risk for the schools to enroll proportionately more children from the well-to-do has long been recognized (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). Congregations which used to be able to provide quasi-free education in their schools a few decades ago may not anymore have the personnel and resources to do so today. In the absence of state support, cost recovery may lead the schools to be unaffordable for some among the poor. These pressures are unlikely to change, and they may even become more severe over time especially in countries where Catholic schools do not benefit from state funding. In countries where Catholic schools are not funded by the state, engaging in discussions with governments about the possibility of receiving at least partial funding is essential for the future.

Second, while the analysis in this note was conducted separately for the three levels of schooling being considered, it must be acknowledged that there are links between these three levels. While enrollment in Catholic nurseries and preschools may not necessarily lead to higher enrollment in Catholic primary schools, the link between Catholic primary and secondary schools is likely to be stronger, with primary schools serving as feeder schools for secondary schools. Given the rise in enrollment at the primary school, and higher transition rates to secondary schools in many low and lower-middle income countries, growth in enrollment should continue for some time at the secondary level in those countries as large cohorts of students enrolled in primary school

complete their primary education. This has implications for strategy and planning. In much the same way that governments use simple forecasting models to project trends in enrollment at various levels based on population growth and education parameters, this type of analysis could be beneficial for Catholic networks, including to assess budget and cost recovery requirements.

Third, gains in enrollment can come in part from accommodating more students in existing schools, but they tend to come for the most part from creating new schools. This again should not be surprising since there is a limit to the ability of existing schools to accommodate more students. But this may be a source of concern for the long-term trend in the market share of Catholic schools since networks of Catholic schools may not always have the means to build new schools, especially at the secondary level where the cost of new schools is higher than at the primary level. As governments and low cost for-profit providers expand the coverage of their secondary school networks in low and lower-middle income countries, even as enrollment in Catholic secondary schools may increase, the market share of Catholic schools at the secondary level may fall, as it did to some extent globally over the last few decades.

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Given rising competitive pressures, the need to excel not only academically but also in other dimensions of the education being provided by Catholic schools, may only intensify over time.

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Fourth, in some countries Catholic schools may struggle in terms of the priorities to be given to two aspects of the education that they provide. On the one hand, the schools have a Catholic identity that they are aiming to maintain, or even strengthen. Investing in the spiritual capital of teachers and staff is crucial for this mission (Grace, 2002a, 2002b). But on the other hand, the schools also need to ensure that students adequately learn while in school. Even if Catholic schools perform better than public schools as measured through national or international assessment data, it does not mean that they are performing well everywhere. The World Development Report on education (World Bank, 2018) and its companion studies (see for example Bashir et al., 2018, for sub-Saharan Africa) demonstrate that many education systems are currently failing their students. For basic literacy and numeracy in primary schools, the average student in low income countries performs worse than 95 percent of the students in high-income countries. Even top students in middle-income countries rank in the bottom fourth of the achievement distribution in high income countries. These gaps are likely to be observed for students in Catholic schools as well as those in public schools. This in turn has implications for the ability of students to become lifelong learners and acquire the socio-emotional skills that they need in life. As public

schools raise their game in this area, so must Catholic schools. The point here is not to pitch one mission of Catholic schools against the other, but simply to recognize that both missions are complementary, and that long-term efforts need to be undertaken in both areas.

Finally, even though there has been almost continuous growth in enrollment in Catholic schools over the past four to five decades, the competitive pressures faced by the schools should not be underestimated. They are likely to increase in the future as the market for K12 education is becoming increasingly competitive. This is the case in a number of developed countries where the market share of Catholic schools has been declining, but it is may also become increasingly the case in developing countries. Public provision is expanding especially in low income and lower-middle income countries, and as mentioned earlier, the emergence of low cost private schools in those countries represents an additional source of competition. While many Catholic schools used to benefit from a comparative advantage in the form of skilled and low-cost teachers from religious orders, this is less the case today. School responses to rising competitive pressures will need to be based on local contexts, but it seems clear that the need to excel not only academically but also in other dimensions of the education being provided by Catholic schools, may only intensify over time.

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