

Monitoring the quality of Catholic schools in Italy

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Abstract

The fourth monitoring of the quality of Catholic schools in Italy, published by the Study Centre for Catholic School, highlights the strengths and weaknesses of Italian Catholic schools. The monitoring analyses a large amount of data, providing a detailed snapshot of the system. Catholic schools in Italy are going through a difficult period, as shown by the steady decline in the number of schools and pupils, but the quality of education remains high. The economic difficulties faced by schools limit access for the poorest social classes and reduce the planning capacity of schools, but there is a clear commitment to welcoming disabled and foreign pupils, updating teaching methods, reducing disciplinary problems. Above all, standardised tests that assess the learning of all Italian students each year show that Catholic schools perform significantly better than others.

Key words: Quality, Evaluation, Catholic School, Italy, Learning Outcomes.

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1. Background and methodology

Attention to the evaluation of the quality of the school system has been growing in Italy for several decades and led in 2013 to the establishment of a National Evaluation System (NES), which is responsible for conducting a systematic evaluation of all schools, both state and non-state¹. Catholic schools had already faced the issue, thanks in particular to the work of the Centro Studi per la Scuola Cattolica (CSSC) [Study Centre for Catholic Schools], set up by the Italian Bishops' Conference specifically to study the sector and support Catholic schools with research and training initiatives². In 2025, the fourth monitoring of the quality of Catholic schools was published (CSSC, 2025a) and we wish to summarise it briefly in these pages. This fourth report follows the first three ones, relating to the school years 2010-11 (CSSC, 2012), 2013-14 (CSSC, 2015) and 2016-17 (CSSC, 2020), which were in turn preceded by a report dedicated to quality evaluation in 2001 (CSSC, 2001) and a pilot research project in 2003-04 (CSSC, 2005).

The latest report, which can be freely downloaded from the website www.scuolacattolica.it, covers the school year 2021-22 and has been published with some delay due to the working times of INVALSI, which provided most of the data. However, the wait has been compensated for by the amount of information collected. INVALSI is formally responsible in Italy for evaluating the education system, mainly through learning assessment tests for all Italian students. Thanks to a formal agreement between the CSSC and INVALSI, it has been possible to access a large amount of data collected from Catholic schools and supplemented by specific CSSC surveys.

This fourth monitoring expanded the scope of the investigation compared to previous ones. In particular it adopts an essentially descriptive method based on five different sources:

- 1) data on the national education system, taken from publications by the Ministry of Education;
- 2) essential statistical data on Catholic schools, already published by CSSC (2022);
- 3) data collected through an online CSSC questionnaire addressed to a representative sample of headteachers of Catholic schools of all levels in 2022³;

¹ The NES regulation was issued by Presidential Decree No. 80 of 28 March 2013. Under this regulation, the NES consists of INVALSI (*Istituto Nazionale per la valutazione del sistema di istruzione* = National Institute for Evaluation of Education System), INDIRE (*Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa* = National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research) and inspectors staff.

² The CSSC was established by the Italian Bishops' Conference in 1995 and since 1999 has published an annual monographic report on educational issues and the state of Catholic schools in Italy. It also promotes research and training initiatives, in addition to the periodic quality monitoring discussed here.

³ The questionnaire was designed to collect data on aspects mainly of an ecclesiastical nature that could not be included in the surveys conducted by the Ministry or INVALSI. The sample ultimately consisted of 738 subjects, with a 95% confidence level and a 3% margin of error.

- 4) data from the Self-Assessment Reports (SAR) compiled in 2022 by all schools of the national system, excluding nursery schools⁴;
- 5) results of the INVALSI national tests administered in 2022 in primary and secondary schools.

2. The context

To understand the situation of Catholic schools in Italy, it is useful to provide some background information about the Italian school system. After childcare services (0 to 3 years), there are the nursery school for children aged 3 to 5 (= ISCED 0) and two subsequent school cycles: the first consists of primary school (6 to 10 years = ISCED 1) and lower secondary school (11 to 13 years = ISCED 2); the second comprises upper secondary school (14-18 years = ISCED 3), which is divided into *lyceums* (general high schools), technical institutes and vocational institutes. The second cycle also includes the vocational education and training subsystem, which is regionally managed and shorter in duration (3-4 years). There are many Christian-inspired vocational training centres in this subsystem, but they are not included in the monitoring under consideration here. The numbers of the Italian Catholic school system in the 2021-22 school year are summarised in Table 1, which appeared in the CSSC Annual Report (CSSC, 2022, p. 222)⁵. These contextual data clearly show the small size of Italian Catholic schools: an advantage in terms of the educational care that can be provided to each pupil, but also a limitation, because the number of pupils is linked to income and therefore to the survival of each school.

Table 1

Key parameters of the Italian Catholic school system; school year 2021-22

(excluding Aosta e Bolzano; excluding also Trento only for nursery school)

	Nursery	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary	Total
Schools	5,739	1,006	510	574	7,829
(% of total)	(73.3)	(12.8)	(6.5)	(7.3)	(100.0)

⁴ Catholic state-recognised schools completed the SAR in about two-thirds of cases, ranging from 75.3% of lower secondary schools to 55.4% of upper secondary schools. Despite these limitations, the reliability of the results can be considered sufficient.

⁵ The data collected by the Ministry does not usually include the three autonomous regions and provinces of Aosta, Bolzano and Trento (out of a total of 110).

Pupils	302,730	127,546	60,413	51,391	542,080
(% of total)	(55.8)	(23.5)	(11.1)	(9.5)	(100.0)

It should be noted that Italian Catholic schools are almost all “equivalent”, because they have obtained recognition of equivalence from the state and are part of the unique national education system established in 2000 by Law No. 62. The national education system is still dominated by state schools, whose pupils amount to 90.1% of the total in 2021-22, with only 9.9% of pupils attending equivalent schools. The pupils of Catholic schools amount to about two-thirds of all equivalent schools, from 89.2% of lower secondary schools to 41.4% of upper secondary schools.

Italian Catholic schools also present a twofold imbalance: on the one hand, the bulk of the system consists of nursery schools; on the other hand, the whole is heavily skewed towards the northern regions, where 68.0% of pupils are located.

The historical evolution of the system is marked by a sharp decline in the medium term. After peaking in the 2010-11 school year, Catholic schools lost a total of 236,767 pupils (-32.0%) over fourteen years, up to 2024-25, mostly in nursery schools. Only in upper secondary schools has there been a slight reversal of the trend in recent years, but this has not been confirmed in 2024-25. In the same fourteen years, 1,992 schools (-21.3%) have also disappeared, with an average of over 140 per year, once again with the highest number of closures among nursery schools (-1,692 = -24.0%).

The evident crisis in Italian Catholic schools is mainly due to economic reasons. The demographic decline, which is extremely severe in Italy, cannot alone justify the loss of pupils. Catholic schools, like all equivalent schools, receive minimal funding from the state (on average, about 10% of total costs), mainly for the first levels of education: nursery and primary school. Compared to an average annual cost per student, which is set for the 2024-25 school year at between € 6,737.47 and € 8,519.89 depending on the school level⁶, the Ministry provides an annual contribution to equivalent schools of just over € 500 million, to which are added modest tax deductions and variable regional contributions. Only for the inclusion of pupils with disabilities has there recently been a specific contribution that has brought public funding from just over € 20 million per year to over € 100 million in six years, without, however, a significant increase in the number of pupils with disabilities (Kaladich, 2023, p. 110). The economic difficulties are evident, especially for smaller schools, generally located in the southern regions.

In terms of management, Catholic schools offer a variety of formulas, with a clear prevalence of religious congregations in primary and secondary schools (from 56.3% of secondary schools to

⁶ Ministerial Note No 2026 of 17-1-2025.

70.0% of primary schools in 2021-22). In nursery schools, on the other hand, congregations account for only 19.0% and parish management prevails (33.4%). In nursery schools, the incidence of social enterprises is also significant, with 17.1% associations, 14.2% foundations and 7.6% cooperatives, which are also present in other school types (from 14.9% to 19.7%).

If we look at the users, the image of Catholic schools as elite schools is confirmed. To classify the social background of pupils, INVALSI uses a synthetic index, the ESCS (Economic, Social and Cultural Status), divided into four levels: low, medium-low, medium-high and high. The analysis reveals that Catholic schools have higher average ESCS values, but above all, they have a strong concentration in the highest social bracket, which in primary school reaches 63.4% in 2021-22 and 89.1% in lower secondary school. The situation is similar in the second cycle, where the highest ESCS level varies between 73.7% and 83.4% in the different types of schools.

At the beginning of this short survey we can start with the building stock of Catholic schools, which has always been of a good standard and is essentially adequate for the complexity of the service. Often, different school levels occupy the same building, which is specifically designed for educational use. A significant indicator may be the ratio between the number of classrooms available for regular teaching and the number of active classes, which in 2021-22 is everywhere above average, ranging from 107.0% in primary schools to 122.4% in secondary schools. Most schools (60.8%) have made significant investments in their buildings over the last five years. The schools document also a good spread of safety and inclusion equipment.

In addition to their physical solidity, the intangible solidity of school structures can also be demonstrated by their history. In most cases, Catholic schools boast a long tradition, although there are also some newly established schools. On average, Italian Catholic schools are around a century old.

The quality of these schools cannot be reduced to numerical parameters, but these are indispensable for documenting and classifying qualitative aspects, bearing in mind that many of the assessments examined are expressed by those who responded to the questionnaires, generally headteachers. Here we will limit ourselves to a brief summary of some of the factors analysed, but it should not be forgotten that – given the unfavourable economic conditions in which Catholic schools operate in Italy – the “reputation” of each school (and of the entire Catholic school system) is largely attested to by the very choice of parents to enrol their children there.

3. The members of the educational community

The vast majority of Catholic school staff are lay people, but among the headteachers there is still a significant proportion of consecrated persons, reaching 43.4% in primary schools. In general, their length of service and stability in the school is greater than that of headteachers in state schools. Among teachers, lay people account for an average of 90.4% of the total. Their stability in the school is linked to the type of contract, which is permanent in 57.0% of cases, with 7.1% working for free (as permitted by law up to 25%).

An important factor in terms of quality is the in-service training of teachers, the content of which covers a wide range of topics. The most prevalent of these topics are, in order, those relating to inclusion and disability, digital skills and new learning environments, and skills-based teaching. In terms of organisation, initiatives promoted by the schools themselves stand out everywhere, with around two-thirds of them being self-financed. Regardless of the content, the focus is on activities promoted by the relevant federation (46.3%), especially in nursery schools (61.7%), where the implicit reference is to FISM⁷. However, attention is immediately turned to general pedagogical and didactic issues (39.4%), which rank approximately first in primary and secondary schools (which refer to FIDAE)⁸. Specific to Catholic schools is the focus on building an educational community, which accounts for 35.1% of choices (but in secondary schools it ranks first with 57.7%). This aim is followed by training on the educational objectives set by the Ministry (30.8%) and in-depth study of the school's educational project (26.6%). Less space is devoted to specifically religious content (13.4%) or content related to the charisma of the institution (9.2%), while there seems to be greater interest in teachers' communication and interpersonal skills (17.2%). Personalised education is the subject of training for 11.1% of schools, but it would occupy a higher position if nursery schools did not lower the average: this methodology, which is undoubtedly appropriate for a Catholic school's educational project, is usually less widely applied in nursery schools.

With regard to pupils, we focus on those who are not Italian citizens (foreigners for brevity) and those with disabilities, the incidence of which is described in Table 2.

Table 2

*Pupils with non Italian citizenship and with disabilities; school year 2021-22
(excluding Aosta and Bolzano; excluding also Trento only for nursery school)*

⁷ FISM (*Federazione Italiana Scuole Materne* = Italian Federation of Nursery School) was established by the Italian Bishops' Conference in 1974 to bring together existing Christian-inspired nursery schools. It currently includes almost all Catholic nursery schools.

⁸ FIDAE (*Federazione degli Istituti di Attività Educative* = Federation of Educational Institutions) was founded by the Italian Bishops' Conference in 1945 to bring together Catholic primary and secondary schools. Within the Church, it was the first association to deal with Catholic schools in a systematic and organised manner.

	Nursery	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary	Total
Pupils with non-Italian citizenship (% of respective pupils)	24,080 (8.0)	5,573 (4.4)	1,985 (3.3)	1,500 (2.9)	33,138 (6.1)
Pupils with disabilities (% of respective pupils)	4,215 (1.4)	3,008 (2.4)	1,460 (2.4)	820 (1.6)	9,503 (1.7)

The percentage of foreign students in Catholic schools (6.1%) is not too far from that of state schools, which as a whole reach 10.8%, but it should be noted that over the years the proportion of foreign students has been growing, in every kind of schools, in parallel with the rate of immigration. A greater presence of foreigners is prevented by costs, but the distance from state schools is not insurmountable, and Catholic schools are by their nature open to welcoming and intercultural dialogue. There is also a presence of non-Catholic pupils (who may of course also be Italian), which averages 5.4%.

For pupils with disabilities, Catholic schools generally record a percentage equal to about half that of state schools, again due to additional costs. While 3.8% of pupils in state schools have disabilities, the figure is 1.7% in Catholic schools. However, there has been a steady increase in the number of pupils with disabilities in Catholic schools, which, once again, by their very nature would like to devote themselves to these pupils in particular. In this regard, we must remember that Italian legislation, in addition to the teaching staff in each class, requires one specialised teacher (known as a support teacher) for every two pupils with disabilities. From this point of view, if we compare the number of pupils with disabilities to that of support teachers, we find an average of one support teacher for every 1.9 disabled pupils, thanks to a very favourable ratio of 1:1.5 in primary schools and ratios slightly higher than 1:2 in other school levels (with a maximum of 1:2.8 in upper secondary schools).

The dynamics of pupils with SLDs (Specific Learning Disorders: dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography, dyscalculia) are diverse and significant, and they are more prevalent in Catholic schools than in other schools. In this case, the comparison is made with the entire national education system, including Catholic schools themselves (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2024, p. 4), and in 2021-22 the situation was as follows (the national system data is shown in brackets): primary schools 2.5% (vs 3.0%); lower secondary schools 9.6% (vs 6.5%); upper secondary schools 13.3% (vs 6.7%). In Catholic schools, therefore, cases of SLDs are twice as high as in the national system, suggesting that, when there are no additional costs for support, families are more willing to entrust

their children with learning difficulties to Catholic schools, probably believing that they will receive greater educational attention there.

We conclude our overview of the members of the educational community with a look at parents, who are an essential part of this community in a Catholic school. Their participation is manifested primarily in periodic meetings with teachers (93.0%), but also in various recreational activities (33.6%), in concrete collaboration in the management of the school (20.9%) and in the promotion of cultural initiatives in agreement with the administrator (15.0%). The SAR measured participation of parents in elections for school councils (or similar participatory bodies existing in Catholic schools), which is about twice the participation recorded in other schools (the data for which is shown in brackets): in primary schools, 53.6% (vs 26.1%); in lower secondary schools, 45.3% (vs. 23.2%); in upper secondary schools, 40.9% (vs. 16.3%). Again with reference to parents, Catholic primary and nursery schools say they aim to involve them in about one third of cases, while more than half of primary and secondary schools also promote forms of educational and religious support for families.

4. Educational processes

The educational offer of Catholic schools corresponds to that of all other Italian schools, but is characterised by certain specific aspects.

In terms of hours, which can normally vary between 25 and 50 hours per week, in Catholic nursery schools most children (58.3%) attend 40 hours per week, with a significant difference between geographical areas (North and Centre above 60%; South around 40%). In primary schools, where the timetable can vary between 24 and 40 hours, the most common weekly timetable in Catholic schools is 30 hours (56.0%), with full-time 40 hours accounting for 19.0%, while in state schools, full-time schooling is the most common choice (46.1%), followed by 27-hour classes (31.0%) and 30-hour classes (18.0%). In lower secondary schools (30-40 hours per week), there are no significant differences between Catholic and state schools. In upper secondary schools, it is necessary to remember the humanistic vocation of Catholic schools, among which general high schools (*lyceums*) clearly prevail, with 83.8% of choices compared to 51.0% of choices for state high schools.

With regard to the curriculum, it is worth noting the Italian legislation on school autonomy, which since 2000 has allowed state schools to manage their organisational and educational structure with a wide margin of freedom. Non-state schools, such as Catholic schools, have always been autonomous and have often promoted original solutions that have then been adopted by state

schools as well. In particular, the law allows for up to 20% of the curriculum timetable to be modified. So the difference between Catholic and state schools in the use of the 20% autonomy quota may be significant: in primary schools, it reaches 53.9% (vs. 21.2% in state schools); in lower secondary schools, it reaches 56.1% (vs. 20.7%); in upper secondary schools, it rises to 67.4% (vs. 29.1%).

With regard to educational choices, Table 3 shows the qualifying options of Catholic schools, and at first glance it seems that the main choice, conditioned however by the high number of responses collected in primary and nursery schools, is to focus on the overall quality of the school without making any particular distinctive choices. However, a more analytical look reveals choices for foreign languages and personalised teaching, together with the support of weaker pupils, which responds to the original vocation of Catholic schools. On the other hand, the promotion of excellence is much lower, emerging only in upper secondary schools; even the focus on digital teaching becomes apparent just as the level of education increases. More consistent is the space given to skills-based teaching, which is the only item that is essentially uniform across all school types and levels.

Table 3

Main methodological and teaching choices of Catholic schools; school year 2021-22

Question: <i>What choices has the school made in terms of methodology and teaching? (max 3 answers)</i>	Nursery	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary	Total
No particular choice, because we focus on the quality of the entire educational offering.	69.3	40.8	31.1	14.1	55.6
Teaching of foreign languages	23.7	40.8	50.0	39.4	30.6
Personalised teaching	20.5	45.8	44.6	52.1	30.1
Systematic recovery action for the weakest	18.6	35.8	52.7	46.5	27.5
Skills-based teaching with real-life tasks	23.3	35.8	24.3	26.8	25.7
Digital teaching	6.3	27.5	31.1	46.5	16.1
Promotion of excellence	2.1	4.2	12.2	29.6	6.1
Other	8.2	4.2	4.1	7.0	7.0

More specifically, with regard to the operational aspects of educational planning in Catholic schools, there seems to be a certain lack of collegiality compared to other schools, where, for

example, planning for parallel classes, groups of pupils and departments are more common⁹. With regard to the adoption of certain teaching methodologies, the widespread use of cooperative learning is striking. This is often mistaken for simple team work and is present almost everywhere, with similar percentages in Catholic schools and other schools.

Two complementary areas of educational activity are recovery teaching and enrichment. In Catholic schools, recovery teaching mainly involves dividing pupils into groups according to ability within the classroom. On the other hand, ability groups in open classes are much less common. The so-called recovery help desk¹⁰ is more prevalent in the second cycle, with no significant differences between Catholic and other schools. Tutor teachers¹¹ are more common in Catholic schools than in other schools. Afternoon homework help is also much more prevalent in Catholic schools.

In a logic of implicit personalisation, the most gifted pupils are instead the users of enrichment activities, again with level groups mainly within classes and much less in open classes. The organisation of competitions in Catholic schools sees those outside the school prevail. The most common initiatives are courses and projects both during and outside school hours, with a slight prevalence of non-Catholic schools. The use of whole days dedicated to enrichment is more common among Catholic schools.

The practices adopted for assessing behaviour are particularly interesting. Table 4 describes the analytical framework of disciplinary measures and shows, first of all, that problematic incidents are fairly evenly distributed, but it should be noted that the survey concerns the number of schools involved and not the number of measures, so the actual incidence of cases could be very different.

Table 4

Measures taken in event of indiscipline (% of schools)

(excluding Aosta and Bolzano)

Measures	Primary		Lower Secondary		Lyceum		Technical Institute		Vocational Institute	
	Cath.	Others	Cath.	Others	Cath.	Others	Cath.	Others	Cath.	Others
There were no problematic incidents	15.2	8.4	4.5	1.6	7,0	6.5	0.0	4.4	4.3	2.4

⁹ In this case, department refers to a group of teachers of related subjects.

¹⁰ The term 'help desk' refers to the availability of a teacher to give supplementary remedial lessons to small groups of pupils at their request.

¹¹ The tutor is the teacher responsible for coordinating the work of colleagues in a class and, in particular, for communication between the teaching team and the pupil or family.

The school did not deem it necessary to take any measures	0.1	0.3	0.0	0.0	0,9	0.1	0.0	0.0	4.3	0.0
The headteacher summoned the families	69.8	73.6	89.2	93.2	87,7	82.1	65.9	88.2	43.5	90.3
Social services intervened	8.2	49.0	11.5	62.3	7,5	22.7	2.4	31.8	4.3	47.4
The headteacher summoned the pupils	52.1	31.3	86.7	80.0	87,2	80.4	68.3	87.4	39.1	89.6
A note was made in the diary or in the register	58.8	60.5	86.2	92.4	81,9	84.4	68.3	87.4	43.5	89.2
Families had meetings with the teachers	79.5	87.6	91.0	96.3	85,9	87.8	70.7	90.6	43.5	91.7
Psychol. counselling or a listening service was provided at school	22.9	62.7	43.1	81.6	51,5	76.0	41.5	79.1	26.1	80.6
The behaviour mark was lowered	36.3	35.7	68.7	70.9	76,2	76.5	63.4	81.6	39.1	83.5
Meetings between pupils and teachers	60.4	62.3	86.5	86.1	83,3	81.3	70.7	85.4	39.1	86.1
Working on the class group	72.0	82.0	83.2	92.2	75,8	75.4	56.1	78.4	30.4	81.3
Temporary removal of pupils	3.8	2.1	32.6	46.5	39,6	33.2	43.9	65.4	13.0	77.4
Financial penalties for families	0.3	0.5	3.5	3.9	4,0	4.8	2.4	10.9	4.3	13.0
Intervention by public authorities	0.8	2.7	2.0	11.7	3,1	7.9	0.0	14.1	0.0	19.6
Implementation of projects about legality education	35.3	63.4	48.6	81.3	45,8	61.4	34.1	71.8	17.4	76.4
Activity useful for the school community	9.3	5.1	27.1	28.0	25,1	23.7	31.7	35.9	8.7	43.1

Other	8.5	7.9	8.8	9.2	11,0	7.6	12.2	9.4	0.0	10.6
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Almost no school neglects its educational responsibility, and all are uniformly committed to disciplining unruly pupils in some way. Among the most common and consistent measures – as might be expected – are the traditional note in the class-register and the summoning of the pupils concerned or their parents by the headteacher or teachers. Lowering behaviour grades is quite common, which should be an almost inevitable consequence, and interventions involving the whole class are also used. Expelling pupils from school, which is surprising to find even in primary schools, albeit in small quantities, is generally less common and often more prevalent in non-Catholic schools. There is also a certain difference in the use of social services or public authorities, which intervene very little in Catholic schools. Psychological counselling is also very rare in Catholic schools, perhaps because of the cost of the service or perhaps because of the preventive effectiveness of the educational environment. Overall, we can conclude that Catholic schools, while not entirely peaceful havens, have fewer behavioural problems than other schools. The cause can be attributed to the combined effect of social selection of users and the educational care that schools are committed to providing to each pupil.

If we now turn our attention to the working methods adopted for the inclusion of disabled pupils, we see that these include, in order, participation in specific school networks, the establishment of ad hoc working groups and the involvement of external parties (families, institutions, associations) in the implementation of projects. In all these cases, non-Catholic schools are more sensitive, with percentages ranging from 70% to 90%, compared to Catholic schools, which range from 50% to 70%. However, Catholic schools are widely committed (over 80%) to adopting tools for inclusion, which are less common in other schools.

With regard to the promotion of various types of projects, Catholic schools are less active, probably for economic reasons: the median expenditure for these projects in the second cycle is € 2,951 for Catholic schools and € 34,583 for other schools. The relative majority of Catholic schools (40.5%) promote between one and five projects, while the relative majority of other schools (44.0%) promote eleven or more. The content of the projects is very varied everywhere.

For a Catholic school, certain fundamental values are also important, and these are generally explicitly stated as the basis of the educational project. The findings depend on the inevitably subjective judgement of the school administrators who completed the questionnaires, but it is noteworthy that the community atmosphere ranks first overall (70.1%), thanks above all to the choices made at the extreme levels of schooling (nursery and upper secondary school); in second place (which for primary school would be first) is the human and Christian formation of pupils

(53.4%); in third place we find good academic results (47.0%), which are, however, almost twice as important in lower secondary school as in upper secondary school, prompting reflection on their respective implicit aims. This is followed by attention to the weakest pupils (40.4%; but for lower secondary school it is in first place), parental involvement (30.8%), the provision of complementary services (26.3%) and, to a completely insignificant extent, cultural/recreational activities promoted for the local area (4.3%) and links with the church community (2.2%).

The main tools used to communicate the educational project externally are open days (73.0%), the institutional website (68.7%) and social networks (64.9%). However, if we limit our focus to primary and secondary schools, the most widely used tool is the web: nursery schools, presumably due to their small size, make much less use of websites (just over half of cases), while almost all other schools use them as their main communication channel. Printed publications are now at the bottom of the ranking.

Quality certification, generally standardised on objective criteria, is present in only 18.0% of Catholic schools, with significant variations between 14.0% of nursery schools and 32.4% of upper secondary schools. The survey of user and local expectations, conducted through meetings or questionnaires, has also been carried out in the last three years by just over half of Catholic schools (52.2%), with a relatively even distribution.

User satisfaction is measured to a reasonable extent: 30.2% of schools do not carry out any surveys, but 38.6% do so for all members of the school community, with the level of satisfaction increasing with the level of education.

Finally, activities related to the ecclesial dimension of Catholic schools deserve attention. Relations with the parish are not very frequent and, as is easily predictable, are closer for nursery schools, where the parish often participates in the school's governing bodies (33.4%). The greatest contact with the parish occurs only for the main pastoral activities, reaching an average of 30.5% of cases, with a maximum of 41.7% in primary schools and a minimum of 12.7% in secondary schools. For the rest, schools have occasional relations with the parish because they are limited to liturgical or pastoral initiatives (20.9% on average) or because the catchment area is distributed among several parishes (10.2% on average, with values increasing as the school level rises). Overall, 12.1% say they have no stable relations with a parish.

A particular case is the presence of catechesis courses for school pupils (on average 31.7%), a circumstance that is especially prevalent in upper secondary schools (45.1%), where students' contact with parishes can be more easily lost. Parents are also often involved in educational and religious programmes specifically designed for them: in primary and secondary schools as a whole, more than half of the responses are affirmative.

With regard to teachers alone, it was also noted how many of them carry out supplementary or recreational activities in addition to their normal working hours. The responses were characterised by a certain reticence (36.4% did not respond) and low participation (24.1%). The availability of all or almost all teachers was recorded in only 14.1% of cases, while another 9.1% reported the availability of at least two-thirds. Participation in qualifying religious initiatives, such as Holy Mass, spiritual exercises and important moments in the liturgical year, is higher. The participation of all or almost all teachers is reported by 44.4% of schools, while another 21.3% reach at least two-thirds.

5. Learning outcomes

In conclusion, let us turn to actual school results, which are perhaps the focus of public attention when it comes to school quality. The situation is inherently complex, as it must take into account full promotions, suspended judgements and failures¹². If we look only at negative assessments, we see that in Catholic primary schools, the cases are completely insignificant (0.2%) and the Ministry does not even report the data for the entire national system. In Catholic lower secondary schools, 0.5% of pupils fail, compared to 1.5% for the entire system; in upper secondary schools, the figure rises to 5.7% for Catholic schools and 6.2% for the entire system. The slightly better figures for Catholic schools can be attributed not so much to their “generosity” in assessment as to a more favourable learning environment. However, the trend appears to be comparable between the system as a whole and Catholic schools.

Since school assessments can be influenced by subjective or local factors, for a more rigorous comparison, monitoring uses national tests administered by INVALSI for Italian, Mathematics and English. These are standardised tests that allow for an accurate comparison between all Italian schools and classes each year, with a view to continuously improving the educational provision. For English, the results of the listening test are distinguished from those of the reading and comprehension test. The tests are administered in the second and fifth years of primary school, the third year of lower secondary school, and the second and fifth years of upper secondary school. For the sake of brevity, the analysis is limited to the final years of each school level, with the results shown in Table 5, which compares the results of Catholic schools with those of all other schools (state and non-state), also distinguishing between certain types of upper secondary schools.

¹² In Italian high schools, in addition to the final assessments of promotion or failure, there is also the so-called suspended judgement, consisting of a partially positive assessment that must be completed before the start of the new school year with tests in subjects deemed insufficient at the end of the previous year.

Table 5*Results of the 2022 INVALSI national tests*

	Italian		Mathematics		English Listening		English Reading	
	Cath.	Others	Cath.	Others	Cath.	Others	Cath.	Others
Fifth year Primary	64.4	62.0	57.3	55.4	86.0	79.9	86.9	80.3
Third year Lower Secondary	207.7	194.6	205.6	191.7	227.6	206.4	225.0	207.5
Fifth year classical, scientific and linguistic Lyceums	199.4	201.0	212.8	215.3	226.7	222.4	217.8	218.7
Fifth year other Lyceums	182.3	181.0	186.1	181.5	205.8	196.7	196.4	192.9
Fifth year Technical Institutes	172.0	167.6	186.8	182.6	199.0	189.1	189.9	187.9
Fifth year Vocational Institutes	158.4	152.5	162.5	162.0	183.3	171.6	174.6	168.8

The different numerical scale used in Table 5 must be explained by the fact that in primary school, tests are administered in paper form and evaluated on a percentage basis; in the two grades of secondary school, on the other hand, tests are taken on computers and their results are normalised with reference to a standard level of 200 points. It is easy to see that the scores of Catholic schools are almost always higher than those of other schools, in some cases significantly so, with a peak in the two English tests in the third year of lower secondary school, where the gap in favour of Catholic schools is 21.2 points for listening and 17.5 for reading. In the second cycle, on the other hand, Catholic classical, scientific and linguistic high schools score 1.6 points lower than similar other high schools in Italian and 0.9 points lower in English reading.

These results can naturally be attributed to the quality of the schools (and teachers) but also to factors external to the school, such as the local area or social background, which we have seen to be far superior for pupils in Catholic schools. Although good learning outcomes cannot be reduced solely to the latter factor, it must be acknowledged that its influence can be significant in many cases.

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