

Everything Catholic Is Closing: The Last Testament of Bishop Ford High School

By [Patrick Sauer & Larry Racioppo](#) | November 4, 2014 - 10:00AM

The Catholic Church is on the decline. Not only has church attendance among Catholics been [steadily dropping](#), but priests are retiring faster than they're being ordained. Meanwhile, the Church's expenses are only increasing. On Sunday, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York's Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan dropped [another bomb](#): 112 parishes will merge into 55, and within 31 of those new parishes one of every two churches will essentially close.

The closings may disrupt entire communities. But for one community in Brooklyn, this disorienting loss is all too familiar. ANIMAL offers an in-depth look at the last days of Bishop Ford High School, [which shut down](#) in August after more than 50 years of service. The Bishop Ford administration allowed writer [Patrick Sauer](#) and photographer [Larry Racioppo](#) to walk through the school and document some of the history that New York has lost by its closing.



On September 8 1918, Bishop Francis X. Ford, the first Maryknoll seminarian, was sent on his maiden missionary voyage. Born in Brooklyn in 1892, Ford landed in Kaying, where, for 27 years, he helped develop Christian communities and oversaw the construction of schools and churches. By April 1951, the Kaying Diocese had nineteen Chinese priests and twenty-six Chinese Sisters to serve 23,000 Catholics. Ford's missionary work ran afoul of the Chinese Communist Party, which seized power in 1949. He was arrested, charged with espionage, and publicly tortured and beaten. In 1952, at the age of 60, Bishop Ford died in prison.

A decade later, a Catholic boys' high school in Windsor Terrace was dedicated to the martyred priest's memory. In 1976, the school became co-ed and was officially named Bishop Ford. The building's design honored Ford's missionary work in China, most notably with a cross atop an oversized rooftop pagoda. It also featured eclectic decor: A red-and-black color scheme, gold tiles, lanterns, Chinese characters, and a lovely chapel that could have been plucked from Canal Street. (You may remember Bishop Ford's interior from such videos as R.E.M.'s "All the Way to Reno (You're Gonna Be A Star)" or Drake's "Best I Ever Had.")



The school was the bastion of a forward-looking Catholic educational system that taught so many sons and daughters of the city's booming middle class, once a majority of the white ethnic Italian and Irish origin, now of African-American and Hispanic ethnicity. Shelves and shelves of books included histories of Catholic saints and feminist poetry, and contemporary works scattered about include *Random Family* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Brooklyn authors like Nelson George, Francine Prose, Jhumpa Lahiri, and the borough's poet laureate, Walt Whitman. From maps and globes, to art books and photography collections, to titles about the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Nets, the library had something for everyone. The spirit was best captured up in the sign that said, "Respect your parents. They did high school without Google or Wikipedia."

But by the summer of 2014, the once-regal lobby had lost its luster and after 52 years, the school was shut down by the Diocese of Brooklyn. There are a number of contributing factors, but ultimately it came down to — as it always does — money. Reports vary, but Bishop Ford owed somewhere between \$2.5- \$4-million dollars to its creditors—both the I.R.S. and the diocese—and had seen its enrollment plummet from roughly 1,300 kids in 2006 to 400 in 2013. A large part of the decline stemmed from a 2008 tuition hike from \$6,000 to \$9,000, intended of course to keep the school financially stable, which many families couldn't afford. Not only did Bishop Ford become less and less affordable to the class it served, but it failed to find its niche in a city where a \$43,000-a-year for-profit school can open with a waiting list a mile long, and a secular population now prefers the once-godforsaken public school system to the Catholic one. Over the last decade, Catholic school attendance is down 35% and it's hard to envision it ever coming back.



The building now houses Brooklyn Urban Garden School (BUGS), a public charter middle school, and seven classes of Mayor de Blasio's universal pre-Ks. Renting out more school space probably still wouldn't have been enough to save Bishop Ford. A source involved in the negotiations notes, "Rental income is significant, but it should also be understood that the building has been poorly maintained for years, and is in need of many, many repairs, upgrades and improvements."

Perhaps the high school closing was an inevitability, but among the teachers, staff, and alumni, it's agreed that the closing was handled as badly as it could be. An emergency meeting of the Board of Directors was held on Palm Sunday, and the announcement was made right before Easter, the holiest day in the Roman Catholic year. Students were led to the auditorium to goof off while the faculty met in the library where an assistant principal dropped the bomb.



A perfunctory fund-raising effort was held, but the only way that was going to work is if Bishop Ford alumni Jimmy Lovine kicked in some of his Beats by Dre money. Letting teachers, faculty, and students—particularly the would-be graduates of the Class of 2015—know at such a late date led to a lot of anger, sadness, and cynicism around the closure. Rumors had been whispered for years, but instead of giving Bishop Ford a year to twist in the wind, the hammer was pounded. It was quick and painful, and lacking information, conspiratorial notions took hold:

“The closing was more than a year in the making.”

“The bishop had it in for us for years.”

“The Catholic Church is selling out to developers.”

The Diocese of Brooklyn wouldn’t answer any questions about a separate corporation. Adding only, “The Diocese of Brooklyn is currently assessing how the building can best be used.”

On August 31 2014, Bishop Ford was officially closed.



(Photos: [Larry Racioppo](#))