

# EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND HARD-CORE CATHOLICISM: SUBLIME SYMBIOSIS?<sup>1</sup>

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*Borrowing* is a term that has multiple meanings. For example, we often borrow things we intend to return such as when we ask someone, “May I borrow a pencil or a cup of sugar?” (How long has it been since you actually heard someone ask to “borrow a cup of sugar?”) In the field of education, of course, *borrowing* also describes one of the key arithmetic subskills involved in the subtraction process. But the kind of *borrowing* I want to focus on today is the kind that occurs when, as my dictionary asserts, someone “appropriates from another source.”

## **Borrowing’s Pervasiveness**

If it true that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” then we currently find flagrant flattery all around us. Borrowing takes place almost everywhere. We see it in the field of entertainment where this year’s new variant of a TV reality show is emulated next year by every other network. Borrowing also takes place in televised sporting events where a few years ago we first saw an occasional pro football player wearing a microphone in a patent ploy to spice up TV sportscasts. Now, in televised sports ranging from NASCAR to competitive needlework, we find during-contest microphones affixed not only to players, but also to coaches, trainers, and even team-mascots. And how about hotels? Do you remember when guests were charged only when we actually consumed something from our room’s mini-bar? More recently, sophisticated motion detectors are being used to invoke charges if you happen to move around the items in your mini-bar frig to see what might be chilling out behind something in front. I was in a new hotel last month where someone—a former guest, I suspect—had left an apocryphal message: “Thou shall not covet thy mini-bar’s contents.” Yes, in almost all realms of human conduct, borrowing abounds.

Borrowing is also seen between fields of specialization, especially emerging specializations. Consider, for example, the field of educational evaluation. In the United States, we saw the emergence of this specialization shortly after the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965—a federal statute requiring that most of its programs be formally evaluated. As educators tried to define and refine this new specialization, they often looked to other fields as potential models. To illustrate, early on, Elliot Eisner and his art-educator colleagues suggested that educational evaluation could be conceptualized as a form of “aesthetic criticism.” At about the same time, several anthropological researchers argued that the most appropriate model for educational evaluation was

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clearly “ethnography.” Still others contended that educational evaluators should carry out their tasks in a quasi-courtroom context, that is, as “adversary evaluation.” Advocates of adversary evaluation believed that from the conflict of pro-versus-con disagreements, accurate appraisals of educational programs would obligingly bubble forth. Yes, emerging specializations quite often look for guidance to other, more established specializations. The field of educational accountability should be no different.

Although some educators may believe educational accountability has been with us since the beginning of recorded history, this is simply not so. Nor is there any substance to a recent claim by federal officials that educational accountability, having originated in Greece during the time of Socrates and Plato, was first formalized when AYP referred to Aristotle’s Yearly Progress. On the contrary, educational accountability should really be regarded as a specialization smack in the middle of emergence. Indeed, although doubtlessly stimulated when ESEA of 1965 was enacted, only during the past two or three decades have we actually seen educational accountability exert a meaningful influence on what transpires in our nation’s classrooms.

The most recent incarnation of ESEA, namely, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), has certainly ratcheted up the stakes associated with this oft-reauthorized federal statute. This is because the dominantly test-based approach to school evaluation called for by NCLB now serves as the cornerstone of a national educational accountability system. In the U.S., when public school educators think about educational accountability, their thoughts turn immediately to NCLB. And, of course, not all of those thoughts are positive. Nonetheless, as an emerging field of specialization, is it not appropriate for educational accountability to search elsewhere for applicable concepts? Why should educational accountability and, in particular, NCLB be denied the bountiful benefits of borrowing?

But from whence should specialists in educational accountability borrow? To answer that question satisfactorily, we really need to consider the fundamental nature of educational accountability itself. My dictionary indicates that someone becomes accountable when this person is “subject to the obligation to justify one’s conduct.” This, then, is *any* accountability system’s defining attribute: *conduct-justification*.

If you think about a defining attribute of conduct-justification, then you will realize that the Catholic Church possesses about 2000 years of experience focused almost exclusively on getting its members, while on earth, to justify their conduct. Indeed, conduct-justification has historically been at the very heart of Catholicism—followed closely, of course, by guilt-induction. I suggest, therefore, that the architects of today’s educational accountability programs give serious consideration to borrowing several time-honored, accountability-relevant concepts from the Roman Catholic Church.

## Two Millennia of Concepts to be Borrowed

But if there are ideas or practices in the Catholic Church that should be considered for possible transplantation to educational accountability, what might those ideas or practices be? Well, I assure you that you'll find far fewer suitable concepts in current-day Catholicism, a definitely namby-pamby version of Catholicism, than would have been found in the hard-core Catholicism I experienced while I was growing up Catholic. That's right, if educational accountability wants to pick up borrowable concepts from the Catholic Church, it should go back to those never-changing ideas that, during the past couple of decades, have seen some serious softening. It is interesting to note that during an era when educators have witnessed a marked toughening of accountability's claws, it was during the same period that Catholicism went cuddly on us.

Let me illustrate. As I was growing up, when Catholics attended Mass, the service was conducted in Latin and, therefore, almost no one knew what was going on. Mass was incomprehensible, hence patently praiseworthy. Latin Masses evoked the same kind of near-reverence engendered by statisticians who employ abstruse procedures that are incomprehensible to non-statisticians.

Those of us who attended Mass didn't know what was going on, but we sensed that it must be good. Besides, for the most important services, the priests wore resplendent, multi-colored robes and employed small Aladdin's Lamps that issued immense amounts of incense. The coalescence of opacity, pomp, and strange-smelling smoke convinced most of us in attendance that whatever was going on must have been worthwhile.

These days, however, if you attend Mass, it takes place in English. Attendees can actually comprehend what is being said—and sung. This sort of service is not fundamentally different from what goes on in Protestant churches! While “comprehension” may be a good thing to promote when educators teach children how to read, comprehension *demeans* a religious service. Hard-core Catholics know that if a church service is fundamentally cryptic, it is more meritorious. So these are the kinds of hard-core Catholic concepts I intend to consider in the following analysis.

### A Proactive Confession

To disabuse anyone of the idea that I know more about Catholic doctrine than I do, I wish to confess in advance that I am far from a doctrinal scholar when it comes to Catholicism. I was baptized as a Roman Catholic within the first weeks of my life, but attended *public* schools until I went to college. During those days, Catholic students in public schools usually took part in a Sunday catechism class—typically an after-Mass hour taught by a kindly/unkindly nun. Most catechism classes were structured in a nun-to-kid Q&A format such as: *Question*: “Who made you?” and *Answer*: “God made me.” If children did really well in answering the nun's questions, they were

given holy pictures, that is, small cards containing pictures of various saints—usually in black and white, but sometimes in color. I can't recall how well a child had to perform in order to be given a holy picture, but not everyone walked away with those weekly prizes. To the best of my recollection, I never saw my catechism classmates trading holy pictures as, in later years, I saw kids trading baseball cards, but I think we missed a bet. Think of the possibilities of a child's trading "an in-color Saint Christopher for two black-and-white Mary Magdalenes and a future draft choice!" Catechism classes, which I remember as being basically boring, might have fun.

Holy pictures notwithstanding, however, my attendance at those catechism classes may have been less than regular or my study habits might have been less than stellar. I know this to be so when I got to college. It was a small *Catholic* college where, after completing a battery of entrance exams, I was assigned to a *remedial* religion class. Apparently, my score on the religion test indicated that I was a Baptist.

Actually, I learned much more about my religion during college. That's because I was a philosophy major and, as such, had to learn what made St. Thomas Aquinas gleeful or glum. Nonetheless, in the following analysis I am leaning only on what I can recall from the kind of hard-core Catholicism I grew up with—sort of an in-the-trenches perception of hard-core Catholicism. I have selected for consideration only five concepts that seem potentially pertinent to educational accountability and its current-day manifestation, NCLB.

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**HCC = HARD-CORE CATHOLIC CONCEPT**  
**NCLB = EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

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I will use the letters HCC to signify a hard-core Catholic concept, and the letters NCLB to represent today's version of educational accountability. Let's start off, then, with consideration of a particularly heavy-duty concept about the Pope's inability to make a mistake.

### **Papal Infallibility**

I believe I had been attending Catechism classes for several years when I was first told that the Pope was infallible. I am not sure, but perhaps the construct of *papal infallibility* was introduced in the usual Q&A way, namely, "Who is infallible?" followed by a rapid choral response, "The Pope is infallible."

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**HCC: PAPAL INFALLIBILITY**

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When the nun in charge of our catechism class finally explained the meaning of infallibility as the ability to *a/ways* be correct, I thought that this was a pretty neat

quality. At about the same time, *Superman* was making his appearance in the comic books I was reading, so I began thinking of our very own infallible Pope as some sort of a cape-wearing super-hero. Even when, several years later, I learned the doctrine of papal infallibility does not refer to *all* realms of papal decision-making, for instance, the Pope's choice between thin-crust and thick-crust pizza, but only to papal decisions regarding "faith and morals." I still regarded this limited kind of infallibility as pretty impressive. I remember thinking that if I possessed even a little of this constrained kind of infallibility, I could probably clean up during each Sunday's holy-picture competition. Yes, the Catholic Church's concept of infallibility clearly warrants consideration by those who operate educational accountability programs.

To illustrate, since her appointment as U.S. Secretary of Education, many of Margaret Spellings' comments contain more than a hint of implied infallibility. For example, most of us can readily recall her oft-reiterated observation that, despite pervasive evidence to the contrary, "No Child Left Behind is 99 and 44/100% pure." Contrary to the allegations of her critics that this comment was an obligatory provision of Secretary Spellings' yet unrevealed promotional agreement with Procter and Gamble, the makers of Ivory Soap, I believe such a statement simply reflects Secretary Spellings' belief that her views are fundamentally free from error.

Indeed, as I was initially preparing this analysis, I received my copy of *Education Week* (1/9/08) where a front page story carried the headline that "Spellings Seeks to Cast Her Glow over NCLB." Well, if Secretary Spellings and her followers believe she is capable of emitting a glow, then is infallibility really such a stretch? I take seriously the views of anyone who glows.

But although we see *implications* of Secretarial Infallibility, to date we have seen no U. S. Department of Education policy statement *formally* asserting such a capability on the part of the Secretary of Education. This may be the time for such a federal pronouncement. Incidentally, if the Catholic Church issues such a policy statement from the Vatican, it is referred to as a "papal encyclical" or a "papal bull." The latter label seems particularly fitting in this instance.

Remember, however, just as the Pope's infallibility applies only to matters of faith and morals, the infallibility of the Secretary of Education could be limited only to matters of educational accountability or, more specifically, to issues associated with NCLB. Just as we have seen prosecuting attorneys increasingly employ limited immunity in criminal cases, we could see federal officials promulgating the notion that the Secretary of Education possesses *circumscribed infallibility*—in this instance limited exclusively to NCLB-related matters.

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**HCC: PAPAL INFALLIBILITY**  
**NCLB: CIRCUMSCRIBED INFALLIBILITY**  
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To the extent that the Catholic concept of limited infallibility has remained in place for centuries, why should NCLB officials not run Secretarial infallibility up their federal flagpole—toward heaven, we assume—to see if sufficient numbers of heathens salute? If this concept is greeted with adequate approbation by the field, then USDE positions no longer need be transmitted to the field in the form of “Guidance” bulletins but, instead, can not only be labeled with a suitably reverential title, but also sent via a more permanent transmission medium—something along the line of stone tablets.

## **Absolution**

A second concept from hard-core Catholicism that warrants serious consideration from accountability apologists is that of *absolution*. Absolution, in Catholic doctrine, refers to the remission of sin or of the punishment for sin. When, after a Catholic has made a forthright confession of sins to a priest, uttered sincerely a prayer called an “Act of Contrition,” and promised not to repeat the just-confessed sins, the priest absolves the sinner.

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### **HCCC: ABSOLUTION**

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Before seeing how this concept might be applicable in the realm of educational accountability, it is important that we distinguish between two categories of sin, namely, *venial* and *mortal* sins. *Venial* sins are inconsequential offences, for instance, telling a trifling lie about something unimportant. If a Catholic dies having committed only venial sins, that person will end up in Heaven. *Mortal* sins, however, are serious suckers. If a Catholic dies who has committed even one mortal sin, and this sin hasn’t been forgiven, then that person will go to Hell rather than Heaven. Mortal sins, therefore, need to be absolved if a person aspires to attain a less heated afterlife.

Closely tied to this process is the notion of *penance*. This is a punishment, prescribed by a priest, to be performed as penitence for one’s sins. Depending on the gravity of a penitent’s self-confessed sins, the priest who hears the confession prescribes a number of prayers the sinner must say silently. For example, the priest might direct the parishioner as follows, “For your penance, say five ‘Our Fathers’ and 10 ‘Hail Marys.’” Both of these relatively short prayers, that is, the Our Father and the Hail Mary, have become known to Catholics by the first two words in each. Some critics suspect that this ingenious labeling device is simply a mnemonic for jump-starting sinners who possess poor memories.

The number and nature of the specific prayers assigned at the close of a confession are determined by the priest who hears the confession. Typically, the magnitude of the assigned penance is closely correlated with the magnitude of the sinning. I can recall vividly that as I entered adolescence and what had, prior to that time, only

been “impure thoughts,” actually became impure *behaviors*, my assigned penances became strikingly more substantial.

But when the appropriate actions have been taken by the person doing the confessing, the priest who heard the confession then issues an absolution that, thereupon, forgives the sinner of the confessed sins. In the days of hard-core Catholicism, when I had finished my confession, the priest would say, “*Absolvo te*,” a Latin phrase meaning “I absolve you.” Now, in this soft-on-sin era, I suspect priests say something such as, “No big deal!”

However, the concept of absolution, and its power to forgive sin, is a potent one warranting serious consideration by architects of educational accountability programs. Let’s face it, educators are not perfect. They will err, but those altogether predictable errors should not be allowed to deter such erring educators from doing future good. A mechanism to absolve educators of serious sin can be an important component of an educational accountability program. Fortunately, NCLB already has such a mechanism in place. It is called a *confidence interval*.

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**HCC: ABSOLUTION**  
**NCLB: CONFIDENCE INTERVAL**

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Confidence intervals are useful statistical indicators of the likely error associated with sample-based estimates of a population’s status. However, in the way federal officials have allowed confidence intervals to be used in connection with the NCLB evaluation of a school’s *adequate yearly progress* (AYP), confidence intervals have been corrupted. They are patently illegitimate to use in the manner that USDE allows.

As confidence intervals are used in an AYP-context, the larger the size of the interval, the greater the magnitude of sin-forgiveness. Whereas a 95% confidence interval will mask many schools’ poor test scores, a 99% confidence interval will mask many more school failures. I expect any day to read an official USDE Guidance indicating that states may now employ confidence intervals in excess of 100%.

Many statistical constructs function like two-edged swords, that is, they cut both ways. For instance, if we *reduce* the probability of a false-positive error, we *increase* the probability of a false-negative error. This, however, is not the way federal officials are currently allowing confidence intervals to function. While federal statisticians allow a school’s *low* performance to be disregarded because, due to the blessed intervention of a confidence interval, that low-scoring school *might* have scored higher, such imprecision-based adjustments are never employed to lower the performance of high-scoring schools. NCLB-approved confidence intervals are two-

edged swords, but one edge is razor sharp while the other edge is layered with duct tape atop gobs of silly putty.

It would be more honest for federal officials to abandon their current obfuscatory approval of low-performing schools on the basis of confidence intervals, and move instead to the use of a more up-front absolution procedure such as that seen in hard-core Catholicism. Besides, think of all the delightful penance possibilities that federal officials could devise.

### **Afterlife Options**

Most religions spring from questions about what happens when people die. Hard core Catholicism, happily, has a definitive answer to such questions. Depending on an individual's sin-status at death, that person goes to one of four destinations, namely, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, or Limbo. Historically, some writers believe that these four alternatives constituted the first and most lingering version of a high-stakes, multiple-choice test.

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#### **HCC: FOUR POST-PERFORMANCE CATEGORIES**

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Let's consider, briefly, the four afterlife options available in hard-core Catholicism. Heaven and Hell are rather well-understood destinations. Purgatory and Limbo, however, are less known locations. Purgatory is a place or state following death in which penitent souls are purified of venial sins or undergo temporal punishment still remaining for forgiven mortal sins. Purgatory, then, is a way-station preceding a person's ending up in Heaven. Limbo is much more elusive. Limbo is derived from the Latin word "limbus" which means hem or border. Many Catholic theologians believe that Limbo is at the border of Hell, but is a place where un-baptized newborns and infants go or where righteous individuals go if they died without being baptized. In a sense, therefore, for certain categories of individuals, Limbo is a place or state of *oblivion*. It is sort of there, but it isn't.

Now let's think how this pivotal concept of hard-core Catholicism could apply to educational accountability. In NCLB, that is, in the law itself, only three categories of post-test performances are required for students, namely, *basic*, *proficient*, and *advanced*. States can add to those categories, for example, by tossing in an even lower "below basic" classification or a higher one such as "frigging fine!" But there are only three *statutorily* required NCLB post-performance classifications of students.

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#### **HCC: FOUR POST-PERFORMANCE CATEGORIES NCLB: THREE POST-PERFORMANCE CATEGORIES**

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In comparing these two classification systems, what is most striking is that one of them contains an essentially invisible category. In any classification structure, this is a particularly appealing feature. For an educational accountability system, it is a feature of inestimable utility. I recommend that NCLB officials or, indeed, authorities in any educational accountability program give serious consideration to adding a Limbo-like category for classifying students' test performances.

In the case of NCLB, for example, think of how useful such a category would be in the year 2014 when all students are to be classified as proficient-or-above. Given the availability of a Limbo category, schools could simply assign their non-proficient students to this essentially non-existent category so that no left-behind child could be seen. It would almost be like, well, a *miracle!*

### **Aggressive Evaluative Inquiry**

In hard-core Catholicism, an *inquisition* is a special tribunal charged with combating and punishing heresy. Given the heretical conduct of many current educators in response to the requirements of educational accountability, there is clearly a role for this Catholic concept in connection with a wide variety of accountability-related functions.

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#### **HCC: AN (NOT "THE") INQUISITION**

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In centuries past, of course, it must be conceded that members of certain Catholic inquisition tribunals may have exercised somewhat excessive zeal in the form of burning, lopping, and selected life-truncating activities. But there is no reason that such excesses need be replicated today. In truth, in the last few years we have become remarkably more relaxed in our definition of what it is that actually constitutes *torture*. Hence, it is time to review the applicability of inquisition tribunals for today's versions of educational accountability.

Fortunately, those who currently operate NCLB possess considerable experience in carrying out precisely this sort of heresy-eradication activity. NCLB refers to this tribunal-based, heresy-elimination process as *peer review*.

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#### **HCC: AN (NOT "THE") INQUISITION NCLB: PEER REVIEW**

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Peer review, as many educators know, is a process whereby USDE-appointed tribunals evaluate the orthodoxy of each state's NCLB *assessment* system. Clearly, the search is for assessment heresy in any form. Heresy, in this instance, is defined

as any departure from federal law, federal regulation, formal federal guidances, or federal whim. Currently, a number of useful NCLB inquisitorial techniques can enhance the efficacy of an even more widespread application of this process. For instance, one of the best forms of peer-review tradecraft is the avoidance of written evaluative feedback to states. Almost all federal communication to state officials regarding the caliber of their state's assessment system is provided orally, typically via telephone conversations in which all participating federal officials take part using voice-distortion technology to disguise the speaker's identity and, therefore, eliminate the possibility of attribution.

If inquisitorial methods can work in the appraisal of state assessment systems, are such methods not suitable for all realms of educational accountability? The answer, of course, is affirmative. Should accountability officials decide to accept my recommendation regarding the expanded application of bona fide inquisitorial methods, a number of excellent medieval guidebooks are available. Such treatises suggest a full range of step-by-step, highly focused procedures to induce candor on the part of any suspected heretic.

### **An Overpopulation Analog**

Another concept from hard-core Catholicism that has special relevance to NCLB stems from a concern about world overpopulation or, more accurately, world overpopulation of non-Catholics. The most obvious manifestation of this concept is seen in a process know as *the rhythm system*.

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### **HCC: THE RHYTHM SYSTEM**

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The rhythm system, though rarely discussed these days, was the only church-approved method of birth-control available when I was growing up. It appears that Church theologians, by coalescing their knowledge of the calendar along with selected insights regarding female physiology, devised a calendrical birth-control system in which, on certain days of the month, avoidance of carnal activity by married persons was strongly recommended. (It goes without saying that, at the time the rhythm system was introduced, these married persons were supposed to represent different genders.) The rhythm system was, perhaps, the precursor of today's "abstinence only" sex-education programs. Married couples were urged by priests, for instance, to "*Just say no* on November 4<sup>th</sup> through the 10<sup>th</sup>, but *just say maybe* on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 11th."

Because it appears that those Catholic theologians were not sufficiently conversant with the caprices of female physiological functioning, the practical consequences of the widespread use of the rhythm system was the birth of enormous numbers of new Catholics. But the rhythm system, often referred to in those days as Vatican Roulette, did give Catholics a lottery-like way of dealing with an issue of significance.

NCLB currently has an operation in place remarkably similar to this sort of lottery. I

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**HCC: THE RHYTHM SYSTEM**  
**NCLB: SUBGROUP ANALYSES**

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am referring to *subgroup analyses*, that is, the analyses of test scores for all of the NCLB-stipulated subgroups such as economically disadvantaged children or Hispanic-American children. And here is where the lottery comparison comes into play. If a school does a terrific job in promoting higher test scores for *all* of its students except for *one* of these statute-specified subgroups, then the *entire* school flops on AYP. Just as in the rhythm system where each month there are about 30 days on which conception can occur, in NCLB there are also scads of ways to go wrong. And this is why I believe NCLB authorities might wish to install an *annual reciprocal* lottery for each school and school district. Such a federal lottery could partially compensate for the potential pitfalls associated with each year's subgroup sweepstakes.

The essence of this procedure would be for USDE each year to supply anywhere from one to three *subgroup signoff-slips* to each U.S. public school—using, of course, a “gold-standard” randomized assignment procedure. Each subgroup signoff-slip would be something like a Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card in Monopoly. Technically, every signoff-slip would be a confidence interval set at a stringency level of infinity. But these exonerating signoff-slips could be applied to *any* low-performing subgroup chosen by local educators. Each year, therefore, every school's educators would know that they would have at least one and, possibly, more ways of camouflaging a stumbling subgroup's performance. In this way, local educators who tend to believe they are being afflicted by a capricious NCLB evaluative system would be able to counter caprice with caprice.

### **Merit in Mystery**

Looking back, then, at the five concepts chosen from hard-core Catholicism and their applicability to educational accountability as embodied in NCLB, a common theme can be seen. Much of the merit associated with certain concepts of hard-core Catholicism stems from the inherently mysterious nature of the Church's doctrines. At the present, although there are elements of the enigmatic in educational accountability, and particularly in NCLB, it is all too clear that there is an insufficient element of *ineffability* currently at hand. Ineffability describes something “incapable of being expressed or described in words.”

The contrast between these five key concepts of hard-core Catholicism and what's currently going on in NCLB, for instance, suggests that it may be time for NCLB officials to bite the bullet and, instead of functioning in its current quasi-opaque

fashion, NCLB should strive for absolute opacity. All people, educators included, groove on the *ineffable*. NCLB needs more, not less, of that elusive quality.