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THE JESUIT UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

NEWS

Contact:

Bob Howe
Director of Communications
Fordham University
888 Seventh Avenue, 8th Floor
New York, NY 10019
howe@fordham.edu
(212) 636-6538 (office)
(646) 228-4375 (mobile)

“The Challenges of Catholic Education: Past, Present and Future.”

**Address to The John Carroll Society
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Joseph M. McShane, S.J., President
Fordham University**

I would like to begin by thanking Msgr. Vaghi for his gracious introduction, and for inviting me to speak with you today. It is an honor to be here with you in the nation's capital.

I would like to dive right into the topic that I suggested to Msgr. Vaghi when he contacted me: the Future of Catholic Education. Now, my friends, that is a vast and open-ended topic. Moreover, since Jesuits have a well-deserved (and hard-earned) reputation for being long-winded, you may be wondering if it was such a good idea to show up here this afternoon. I wonder about the same thing myself. You may feel even more uneasy when I tell you that I will follow the time-honored Jesuit way of constructing a talk: I will address three points. Good Lord! We may be here for longer than it took to pass the stimulus bill! I promise you, however, that I will do my level best to get you out

of here as quickly as I can. As for the three points (or parts) of the talk: they are the three points that every historian is drawn to: the past, the present and the future. Why? We cannot understand or wrestle with the future of Catholic education unless we understand the context from which that future will grow. For better or for worse, that context has important historical roots as well as present cultural and religious challenges. So, fasten your seatbelts and prepare for a quick ride through the three points.

As for the past (or the history of Catholic education), let me make it clear at the outset that I am not speaking about education in the universal Church. We are only speaking about American Catholic education. (Therefore, we don't have to dig into the history of monastery schools in the Middle Ages or the Jesuit colleges of the Reformation. All we have to do is look at the way in which Catholic education developed in the United States. That takes away the pressure to reserve a room for the night--or for the week.) With that welcome limitation clearly in mind, I wonder if I could frame a thesis that will help us get a handle on the history of American Catholic education: The American Catholic Church created its own school system as a response to the felt need to protect itself and its people from the cultural animosity they felt in America. The cultural animosity to which I refer here was strong and was experienced as both religious and ethnic prejudice. Our immigrant ancestors were deeply aware of these prejudices that the culture had against them. They were equally aware of the fact that the culture wanted them to drop those things that marked them as foreigners so that they could assimilate fully into American society. (For our ancestors, complete assimilation then meant that they would have to give up both their faith and the languages that they brought with them to America.) The bishops of the 19th century were deeply aware of the pressure that the immigrant members of the church felt. Therefore, they

sought to insulate them from the pressures of American society in significant ways. One of the most audacious strategies for protecting their people from the hostility of American culture was the creation of the Catholic school system.

The grand architect of the Catholic school system was John Hughes, the first Archbishop of New York, who served the local Church from 1842 to 1864. Hughes took on the Public School Society of New York and demanded that they deal more sensitively with the immigrants and not force/coerce Catholic children to adopt the regnant religion of American society. He got nowhere. Rebuffed by the authorities, Hughes decided to start a parallel school system, a system in which the faith would be preserved. As he and his episcopal colleagues shouldered the task of building this parallel system, they faced enormous challenges: money, staffing, the diversity of the immigrant church, and nurturing a shared sense of ownership in the schools. The bishops did not shrink from the challenges. Indeed, so urgent did the bishops feel the need was to maintain and pass on the faith that the Councils of Baltimore (most notably Third Council in 1884) decreed that every parish had to have a school--and that the school should be the first building built in any parish-- (This, by the way, was undertaken at same time that the bishops were involved in the construction of what has been called the Empire of Charity: a network of social and educational institutions that were thought to be necessary to maintain the faith in a hostile cultural environment.)

In spite of the challenges, the bishops succeeded in the erection of the parallel system of education that Hughes envisioned. Staffing was taken care of by the extraordinary number of vocations (especially to religious congregations of sisters) that flooded into convents and novitiates in America, and by a seemingly limitless supply of European missionaries who flocked to America

to tend to the immigrant flock. As for dealing with the challenges posed by the ethnic diversity of Church's membership, it is important to remember that the American Church was never monolithic. Far from it. It was incredibly diverse. In fact, the American Catholic Church was (and is) the only institution in the nation (aside from the nation itself) that mirrors the national motto/aspiration: out of many, one. Therefore, the staffing was not monolithic nor were the schools all cookie-cutter schools. Far from it. They reflected the ethnic villages (neighborhoods) in which the Catholic people lived. This was a brilliant strategy: the bishops sought to keep the Church together by catering to the very different needs of their diverse flock. (They sought unity through diversity.) That meant that schools reflected linguistically and culturally the neighborhoods in which they were located.

As for money: it was always short. Yet, it seemed to appear as if out of nowhere from the pockets of the poor people who sent their children to the schools. This, of course, raises the question: why would the poor (and a few rich benefactors) contribute to the building, maintenance and survival of the schools--especially when the public schools offered free education to all comers? The answer lies in the immigrant experience, the cultural hostility the immigrants experienced around themselves and the shared sense of ownership and purpose that emerged from the collision of these two forces. As for the immigrant experience: there were very few things that the immigrants were able to bring with them. Faith was one of those portable treasures that they were able to bring. It took up no room on the passage, but it linked them to both the lands that they had left, and to the system of meaning that allowed them to make sense of their lives. As for the hostility that they encountered: it only served to make them want to hold on to their faith all the more tightly. (There is something to be said for defiance.) Therefore, you had the creation of

evolution of a shared sense of purpose in every immigrant neighborhood: family, parish, school and ethnic networks all believed the same things. The lessons that were taught around the dinner table were reinforced in the pulpit and the classroom and on the streets of the neighborhood. The product was an extraordinary achievement: a school system that was owed by the people and owned in two important ways: It was owned in the sense that the people paid for it voluntarily. It was also owned because the people who paid for its maintenance believed that its central proposition (namely, the passing on of the faith) was important. For the Irish, the faith was central. For other ethnic groups, another central benefit accrued to the communities that built the schools: their language and culture were preserved in the face of a hostile culture. Faith and character were stressed in all that was done in the schools.

But let us be clear on one additional point: the school system was--as it had to be--a way-station on the path to full Americanization. Therefore, although the schools stressed the importance of passing on the faith, they also stressed the need to prepare students to be players in the culture and the world that they would inhabit as they grew older. Since their students were outsiders and suspect, therefore, excellence was stressed in all things. The basics (especially in English) were mastered; and proven accomplishment was acknowledged to be a passport to worldly success.

This model continued to reign in the American Church until the second half of the 20th Century. (On this point, I would challenge you to look back on your own experience if you are more than 45 years old. If you do so, you will find your memories filled with images of orderly schools presided over by legions of remarkably dedicated religious women. And in those schools,

the faith was passed on; character formation was seen as important as mastery of secular subjects; and you were prepared to take on the world—on the world's terms.)

The Present really begins in the aftermath of World War II. Following the war, one of the great transformations of American life begins with the suburbanization of American culture. Ethnic Americans (and others, of course) left the central cities--where the empire of charity was rooted. Catholics, moreover, began to compete with their counterparts in every sphere of American life. In fact, they began to surpass their counterparts in economic terms. They arrived. And they knew it. The first phase of suburbanization was a dizzying time for Catholics. In the first burst of suburban growth (when they settled in the Levittowns of the country) middle class American Catholics attempted to reproduce the patterns of religious life that they had known in the cities. Therefore, they built new parishes with reckless energy. Following the now age-old pattern dictated by the Third Council of Baltimore, moreover, they poured their money into the construction of schools before churches could be built. As for staffing these new schools, they did not give it a second thought. The explosion of vocations after World War II supplied enough teachers to cover both the cities and the suburbs. The increasing economic success of Catholics also allowed pastors to believe that parish life and Catholic education would continue as it always had.

The Second Phase of suburbanization, however, proved to be far more challenging, and somewhat disorienting. The comfortable religious world in which American Catholics had grown up changed dramatically in the 1960s. 1960, of course, was a watershed year for American Catholics. The election of the first (and so-far only) Catholic president seemed to signal that the

culture was finally ready to accept Catholics as real Americans--and not just challenges to the nation's professed belief in pluralism. Then, in 1964-65 the Second Vatican Council came to a close. Almost immediately, the American Catholic community was forced to wrestle with a number of questions and challenges that it had never had to face before. Vocations dried up--almost overnight. As a result, the staffing of the schools became more of a challenge. (And let's be honest: the American church is the creation of religious women. Without them, the empire of charity would have been impossible. Without them, the school system would not have come into existence.) In the 1960s, the lure of religious life seemed simply to disappear because there were new and exciting ways to find and serve God. In any event, staffing became more challenging because it became more expensive. If that were not enough, the sense of difference that had made the creation of a parallel universe necessary in the 19th and early 20th centuries seemed to evaporate in the minds and hearts of American Catholics. This development, in turn, called into question the need for the schools. (The shared sense of purpose that had sustained the schools and the compact upon which they were built seemed to disintegrate. With it went the sense of urgency that had rallied the faithful around the schools for more than a century.)

At the same time, the schools themselves seemed to take on a new mission. On the homefront, when the immigrants left the ethnic villages (neighborhoods), they were replaced by non-Catholics--many of whom were African-Americans. Interestingly enough, the new inhabitants of the old ethnic neighborhoods were more like the old immigrants than either group at first realized: they were outsiders; they were the victims of cultural hostility; they were in need of the kind of education that could (and experience proved would) make life better and more meaningful. Therefore, the Catholic schools of the ethnic villages became beacons once again. They continued

to serve the poor; they continued to stress character formation and the passing on of the faith; and they continued to see themselves as way-stations on the road to full acceptance--and success. And they did it (and do it) better than any other schools for the same reasons that they were able to serve the immigrant populations so well: they were owned by the people in the neighborhoods and endowed with a shared sense of purpose.

But what of the Catholic community? In the second phase of the present age, the Catholic community almost re-discovered their own schools. In their own lives, they came to believe (as did their ancestors before them) that the schools had transcendent value--or a number of value propositions attached to them. With regard to the first: American Catholics have once again discovered that the faith has transcendent value. In fact, they have discovered that the value of the faith for connecting them with transcendence -- with God -- is so great that it has to be preserved. They have rediscovered that the faith offers a system of meaning that alone makes sense of their lives. Therefore, they have come to value the schools so much that they are willing to pay the high price of sending their children to them. They have also discovered that the value of (I hate to say it) the Catholic educational brand. What do I mean by that? Parents are willing to invest in Catholic schools because they believe (rightly) that the schools will reinforce the values that they teach their children at home. They see them, therefore, as resources that they can use or rely on in the work of forming character--and of preparing their children for success in life. (When I say that, I am fully aware of the fact that I may seem to be suggesting that parents see a transactional value in the schools: invest in Catholic education and your child will be a success. There is an element to that. But parents also see a different kind of success offered in a Catholic school: the success that is seen in a life well-lived, or lived with purpose.)

Finally, in the context of our past and present, we can contemplate what the future might hold for Catholic education. (It was certainly a long time coming! Good Lord!) Since we are at the end of a long talk and all of us (myself included) are stealing longing glances at the exits, let me cast this final part of my all-too-long talk in the form of a series of theses that can serve as jumping-off points for conversations and discussions on the Metro or in the finer bistros in the metropolitan Washington area in which you will gather with friends in the coming weeks and months.

A. First Thesis: the challenges that Catholic education has faced and overcome in the past fifty years will pale in comparison to the challenges that it will face in the next fifty years.

1. Reason: the cost of maintaining the system will become more burdensome as the last of the post-World War II generation of religious personnel retires. This will tax the will of the Catholic community as it has never been taxed before.

B. Second Thesis: the Catholic school system will survive and thrive only if the American Church displays the wisdom that it showed in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This thesis has several sub-theses:

1. First Corollary: the American Catholic School System will survive and thrive only if the Church is clear about and stresses the values that the system offers to its people. That is to say, the schools will only thrive if the Church continues to be successful in convincing its people that the faith has transcendent value in their lives.

2. Second Corollary: the American Catholic School System will thrive only if the Church recognizes that it is a community of communities--and that the needs of the various communities that it is called to serve are different. (This is nothing new. The American Church has been a good servant of its people precisely because in the 19th and 20th centuries, it recognized that the needs of the Irish were different from the needs and interests of the Italians, and that the needs of the Germans and Polish were different from those of either the Italians or the Irish.) In the future, the Church will be called to recognize and cater to (and I use that word purposely) the needs of Latino-Catholics, African Catholics, Caribbean Catholics, Anglo Catholics.

3. Third Corollary: building on the insight contained in the second corollary, we can say that the American Catholic School System will thrive only if it is responsive to the diverse cultural backgrounds and needs of the Church's people--as it was in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

C. Third Thesis: The American Catholic School System will survive and thrive only if it is able to believe in, nurture and build community-based schools in which ownership is shared by the parish community, the school faculty and the parents. (This is what made the schools successful and vibrant in the past. It is what will sustain them into the future.)

D. Fourth Thesis: We have to recognize, celebrate and capitalize on the fact that Grace builds on nature. That is, of course, not an original thought on my part. But, you might wonder, does it have to do with the future of American Catholic Schools? My friends, it has everything to do with the future of our schools. It is the sneaky part of dealing with the future of Catholic schools in America. It is only if we recognize that grace builds on nature that we will regain a foothold or

retain the foothold that we already have in the hearts, minds and lives of middle-class and upper--middle-class and upper-class Catholics. What do I mean? Simply this. In the pluralistic and competitive environment in which Catholics live, successful Catholics have a dazzling array of choices for their children. Therefore, Catholic schools--from pre-K to colleges--have to be remarkably successful in the work that they do. If they are, they will be magnets for families who are looking for the brand that will make it possible for their children to be successful in life. And there, my friends, is where the schools can become instruments of evangelization. Students will come in the door expecting one thing (namely, an entree to a successful professional life) and they discover something entirely far richer: they will discover the faith, a treasure beyond all telling, a system of meaning that will enable them to make sense of their lives and that will bring them into contact not only with the wisdom of the past but with the Author of All Wisdom. The brand will bring them in; the success they seek will keep them in the seats; and the wisdom of love will make them whole.

E. Thesis Five: The American Catholic School System will thrive only if it is seen as such a great, transcendent and transforming instrument of both grace and personal enrichment (and hence a real value) that the Church's people will invest in.

For my part, after spending nearly fifty years in Catholic education, I believe that the system is of such value that we have to renew the compact that our ancestors made to make sure that they survive. Moreover, as someone who has been called to serve a Catholic university, I want you to know that I sell the brand in season and out of season--to make a place for faith at the American table--whether that table is the dinner table around which you gather each day or the

table of American public opinion, for you see, I believe that, as John Robinson said when he sent the Puritans off to Massachusetts Bay, “The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth out of His Holy Word--for the good of the nation, the Church and the world.”

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