

# **“CULTIVATING HOPE THROUGH CATHOLIC EDUCATION”**

## **URBAN ALL-AMERICAN CELEBRATION**

**TOLEDO, OHIO**

**May 5, 2009**

Thank you very much for inviting me to be here this evening. Preparing to speak to you has been a very good experience inasmuch as I was reminded of how valuable Catholic education is and that the Church has dedicated itself, since its beginning, to the education of the Catholic faithful as well as those not Catholic.

In the first centuries of Christianity, the Church sought to teach as clearly and effectively as possible the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Church that he left. Great centers of learning were created in the Middle East and around the Mediterranean, and out of the darkness of the Middle Ages great universities were created often around cathedral schools. In our own country, the parochial school system is the largest private school system in the world. In the United States there are 187 Catholic universities. The Church has been effective in educating not only the elite and the wealthy but also the poor and the disadvantaged.

The education of the poor is not meant to simply bring them out of a disadvantaged culture, but to make children from poor families contributors to the overall common good of society and of the Church. Through education, the poor are able to heed the call to leadership in every field, religious and secular. This is especially true of those who come from Latino, African American, and other minority groups. Currently, of all Catholic school students (nationally), 12.6 percent are Latino and 7.6 percent are African American/Black. They will not only serve those of their own background, but the totality of our society and the Church. Latinos

are called not merely to engage in Latino ministry but to serve as evangelizers, catechists, priests, religious, teachers and parish leaders for the entire Catholic community.

We can be certain that there **will** be leaders that will be forthcoming from minority and poor families. Our task as educators is to ensure that they are leaders with a moral conscience, formed and guided by principles such as those which are part of the rich tradition of Catholic social teaching.

The U.S. bishops have focused on four pillars of Catholic education: 1) to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed; 2) community in Christ is experienced; 3) service to our sisters and brothers is the norm; 4) and thanksgiving and worship of our God is cultivated. It is true that Catholic schools have to prepare our young people for their professions in the secular sphere, yet we must never lose sight of what Catholic schools are all about, and the bishops have told us what components make up true Catholic education.

When the bishops speak of thanksgiving and worship, they are referring especially to the Eucharist as an act of thanksgiving and the renewed saving action of Jesus Christ in our midst. Through baptism we begin our life in union with the Risen Lord and in the Eucharist that life with Christ is nurtured in word and sacrament. What this means to me is that the call to holiness is heard loud and clear in Catholic schools and it is at Catholic schools where the means for growth in holiness are provided through the study of God's Word, the sacraments and prayer. Christianity is more than an intellectual or academic exercise; it involves a response to the Gospel message and to the person of Jesus Christ with a life that is moral and upright. Given the complexity and challenges of an increasingly secular and material culture, we need, more than ever, what our Catholic schools have always produced: human persons imbued with Christian values and gospel principle.

Cardinal Francis George, in a recent talk that stresses Catholic education for Latinos, quotes researcher Robert Putnam, “Latinos should be considered the leading indicators of American Catholicism’s future.”

One of the greatest hopes that I see in the Catholic Church in the United States today is the growing numbers of Latinos, either migrating to the United States or being born of Catholic immigrants from Latino countries. Moreover, my hope is elevated in that we probably have more Latino children in our Catholic schools than ever before. That is certainly true in the southwest of the United States, the part of the country about which I am most familiar. The negative side is that the percentage of school age Latino children attending Catholic Schools nationally is only 3 percent of children. That amounts to only 300,000 children and young Latinos.

We bishops must ever keep in mind the reality that 39 percent of our current Catholic community is made up of Latinos. They make up 41 percent of Catholics under the age of 30, and 44 percent of Catholics under the age of 10. It is estimated that by the second decade of this century, the Latino population will make up 50 percent of all Catholics in the United States. I am deeply grateful that schools such as yours reach out and welcome Latinos and other minorities into our Catholic faith communities.

We are currently being deprived more and more of the witness of women religious who were so prevalent before in our Catholic schools, yet wonderful, dedicated lay Catholics have risen to the fore and are now providing that necessary witness to service. Our students know that those teaching them are making enormous sacrifices to teach in our school; they could be receiving much bigger salaries outside our Catholic school system. I do not know any wealthy Catholic school teachers or principals.

The most obvious advantage of Catholic schools is the freedom we have to proclaim Jesus Christ without the fear of being closed down by any official authority. It is obvious to me that, because Catholic education has been available to our young people, the Church in our country is strong and vibrant, and even growing in some places. I believe it is the memories of the experience of community that we cherish long after we leave the classrooms of Catholic schools. This is of utmost importance inasmuch as our Catholic faith is not just an intellectual or head trip. As I said before, it has to do with a lifestyle that should be a natural consequence of knowing the truth of Jesus Christ.

One of the most positive advantages for young people enrolled in our Catholic schools is that their dignity and human worth are affirmed over and over. Catholic education teaches that all people have received from God gifts and talents that ought to be developed through self-discipline. Catholic education provides that discipline in an atmosphere of community where responsibility and contribution to the common good are promoted. In the Catholic school, students are reinforced with the self-knowledge that they can accomplish their goals.

Contrast this picture with that of the environment often seen in an urban setting where violence, drug and alcohol addiction, immigration hysteria, and teen pregnancy contribute to a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. The Catholic school will create in children of poor families a strong hope for the future.

Moreover the emphasis on community among children of diverse cultures and races will help alleviate the present day racial tensions in some of our urban settings.

Due to the cost of tuition, parents and caregivers from poor households are often discouraged from sending children to a Catholic school. Minority and poor people often find it hard to look far into the future, and many of their decisions are made on the basis of immediate

needs and desires. Perhaps, if Catholic schools provided parents and caregivers with classes in stewardship, they could learn strategies for financial planning and the sharing of their gifts. This could also include providing for current needs and eventually for desired goods. In addition they could learn budgeting techniques which would allow for tuition.

With so many alumni from our Catholic schools in the U.S., scholarships should be forthcoming to assist poor Catholic children and others to attend and graduate from our Catholic schools. We often hear that those who receive scholarships later in life create scholarships out of a sense of gratitude and payment of a debt owed.

Theologian Dr. John Cavadini has said “Catholic education is a kind of “witness” and is rooted in fundamental [Catholic] values such as, preeminently, the dignity and sanctity of human life. This includes a witness to the dignity of the poor as human beings and as made in the image of God. Catholic Education is a witness to this basic value, founded in our belief in Creation and in the Incarnation of the Son of God who became a human being.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Cavadini also says that Catholic education must stress Catholic values, and when we link that with the quality of Catholic education, it is a powerful combination we can offer to inner city students. In the Catholic school, these students are taught not just how to make a living but how to live.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Cavadini goes on to say that Catholic Education should help the poor not only to come out of poverty but also to help them have a sense of their own dignity so they will feel empowered to have a better life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. John Cavadini, email message to author, May 2, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Catholic education aims at more than superficial measures of success such as high academic standings, sports championships, and trophies. Our greatest challenge is for the school to be a community of faith based on the beatitudes, the great blueprint of Jesus for the world.

This community of which I speak is made up of, first of all, teachers and administrators who are passionate about handing on the faith, and integrating faith into the study of the arts and sciences; students eager to learn the truth of Jesus Christ; and parents who are willing to sacrifice and invest in the rich potential of their children. The rest of the community, by its prayers and material support, also help to keep alive the tradition of excellence and the spiritual formation of young men and women.

These young men and women will eventually be engaged in the enormous struggles of the entire human family that desperately needs the inspiration that those coming out of Catholic schools can provide.