‘New Realities’ in Catholic High Schools

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Story by TARA CONNOLLY

"If dioceses don't take really creative steps to face the fundamental challenges in their schools – things are going to get a lot tougher," said Father James Heft, author and renowned educator, Sept. 13 at DeSales University, Center Valley.

Father Heft, who serves as the Alton Books Professor of Religion and president of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California, outlined some of the challenges during his presentation, "Catholic High Schools: Facing New Realities," at the 2012 Ruggiero Lecture on Catholic education.

After presenting the history of Catholic schools in the United States and describing the major legal decisions that have influenced their evolution, Father Heft described the distinctive and compelling mission of a Catholic high school.

He also expressed hope for Catholic education, whose enrollment figures stand at less than half of the 5.6 million parochial students in 1965.

"Is Catholic education in a crisis? I would say 'yes and no.' The numbers are bad," said Father Heft.

"But the Holy Spirit knows what he/she is doing. I believe that and I don't despair. The fact that there are still more than 2 million students is an amazing thing. But we can do better. Every time there is a crisis in the church – things get revved up."

While cost is not the primary reason behind the challenges facing Catholic education, Father Heft said, Catholic schools face the same difficulties that would arise for car makers if the government created a car and gave it away for free.
"One of the reasons Catholic colleges and universities are doing well is because they woke up and built endowments. If you don't do that, you are very vulnerable," he said.

But the most fundamental challenges facing Catholic high schools, according to Father Heft, deal with their mission, faculty and culture.

"Our greatest challenge lies in our vision and leadership. What makes the difference is that we raise up people with vision, passion and a sense of religious institution," he said.

Father Heft also called on Catholic high schools to recruit educators who are "intellectually Catholic," welcoming and able to sharpen minds and the school's mission.

In addition, he urged educators to place emphasis on other subjects and not just theology.

"What is taught in English class? How about physics and the cosmos and all the incredible things going on in nature and life on other planets?" he asked.

"Faith is above reason. But it is not beneath reason. Faith includes reason. It is really critical that we not only realize the intellectual but the interpersonal as well," said Father Heft.

He also called for teachers who are witnesses and warned against teaching religion as "do's and don'ts."

"Catholic high schools should have gifted teachers with gifted techniques. We need witnesses as teachers. Teachers do not have a lot of regard and there is not a lot of veneration for teachers. That in itself is indicative of our problem," he said.

He called teaching a vocation and the "greatest profession," and pointed out that there is never a copay or hourly fee to visit a great teacher.

"It's important for teachers to remember that first and foremost 'who' you are speaks louder than 'what' you say," said Father Heft.

"Students will remember if you're a lousy teacher. They might not appreciate it if you are a good person, cared about them or worked hard with them – but they will remember it later," he said.

With social media as part of the new frontier, Father Heft ended the presentation by maintaining Catholic high school must help students navigate the social networks.

"I always tell my students to use it to create deeper relationships and 'don't let it use you,'" he said.
Dr. Philip Fromuth, secretary of the Secretariat for Catholic Education, attended the lecture and buoyed Father Heft's insight and suggestions.

"It was an inspirational and thought-provoking talk on both the challenges confronting and the opportunities available to Catholic education," said Fromuth.

Creating growing endowments to support the mission of Catholic schools is critical, and the role of the educator to challenge and intellectually engage students is an essential component to Catholic education."