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The Genius of Catholic Education

Inaugural Lecture, 16 September 2002

Introduction (Rev. Thomas F. Dailey, OSFS – Director, Salesian Center for Faith & Culture)

Good evening and welcome! The lecture series which we inaugurate this evening is named in honor of St. Leonie de Sales Aviat, the foundress of the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales, who was canonized a saint in the Roman Catholic Church in November of 2001. The series is intended to celebrate the virtues inherent in her teaching young ladies and also in her example and way of life.

Through the generosity of the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales and the Oblate community here at DeSales University, we have endowed this lecture series to focus first and foremost on Catholic education. As far as we know, this is the only lecture series in the country dedicated specifically to this topic. And tonight, we are going to have the very first lecture, so you are part of history and we thank you for coming here.

We could think of no better lecturer to kick off this series than tonight’s speaker. As of September 1st of this year, he has had lots of time to think about his lecture because he is now retired, after having served 33 years as the chief administrator of the Catholic school system of the Diocese of Allentown. When he was appointed to that position, he was one of only thirteen lay people in the country to hold that kind of an executive position and the youngest person ever. His list of achievements in this job are endless: from overseeing the construction of schools and implementing governmental policies dealing with Catholic education, to establishing endowment
programs with billions of dollars to provide for Catholic education. Our speaker tonight is the best anyone could find to speak about the importance, value, worth, and genius of Catholic education. As of this May, he is also an alumnus of DeSales University, for we granted him an honorary doctoral degree at our last commencement. I am sure he will outline for you the momentous things that have happened in the world of education. So without further ado, it is my pleasure, indeed my honor, to introduce to you the inaugural Aviat lecturer in Catholic education, Dr. James Cusimano.

LECTURE

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I have a short story to tell you about the invitation this evening. I think it was in this very same room, at the end of last school year, that I was invited here as part of the President's Council. The President, Fr. Bernie O'Connor, had just completed his wonderful remarks on the future of DeSales University. And what a grand future it has. At the end of his remarks, he introduced Fr. Tom Dailey as the Director of the new Salesian Center for Faith and Culture, who said that in the upcoming academic year, they were going to start a new lecture series in honor of St. Leonie Aviat, and it would be focused on Catholic education. I thought, “Oh, what a great idea! I wonder who their first speaker will be? It will probably be the one and only Fr. Dan Gambet, the father of higher education here in the Lehigh Valley.” Well, I was very surprised when Fr. Dailey then said, “We are going to invite Dr. James Cusimano.” I’m sitting out there in the audience and had not yet received an invitation. Then I got my next surprise when he said, “Yes, and the topic will be The Genius of Catholic Education.” I thought, “Well, he’s been reading the newspaper” because I happened to mention this to a newspaper reporter who was interviewing me about my retirement. When the reporter asked, “What are you going to do?” I told him that I have a couple of books in mind that I might like to write and one of them is on the genius of Catholic education.

I’m not so sure how carefully he read the article because I said clearly in the article that I’m going to write a book on the subject. I haven’t yet written it. What I’m going to present to you this evening are some of my insights from my long history of Catholic education. I hope it will be helpful to each of you, although I feel I’m speaking to the choir here this evening. My intended audience for this book, and it will be a book in the near future, is really a more secular audience, those who know little about Catholic education. After I’ve finished my remarks, please feel free to give me some more suggestions or ideas to share with the general populous about the genius of Catholic education.
Background

Let me begin by providing you with some background about the diocese of Allentown and our Catholic educational program K-12 because that’s where I’m coming from in giving these remarks this evening. I thought I’d give a brief power point presentation on some of the basic statistics about our Catholic educational program in the diocese. I’m sure my former staff members, whom I see in the audience, are quite familiar with this data!

The Allentown diocese is one of eight in Pennsylvania. We have about 152 parishes in the diocese, covering a five-county area: Berks, Lehigh, Carbon, Northampton and Schuylkill counties. It was established in 1961 and was split off from that very famous neighbor of ours, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. In 1968, when our first diocesan synod was promulgated, we established the diocesan board of education.

Now, here’s a brief quiz. Does anyone know who the first president of the Diocesan board of education was? I see a gentleman in the back there saying yes. The answer is Fr. Dan Gambet. One of my last actions in office this past summer was writing a letter to Fr. Gambet, who after some 30 years is being recycled back to the Diocesan board of education. I welcomed him back as a new member for this school year.

The Catholic educational program of the diocese includes 9 high schools, 52 elementary schools, and 3 special education centers, one in Reading, one in Allentown, and one in Pottsville. All of these schools serve approximately 17,000 students annually. In addition, we operate 52 daycare programs for three and four-year old children, which serve another approximately 2,000 children. The children served by all of these formal Catholic educational programs number about 19,000 students annually. In recent years, we’ve added extended care programs, also known as after-school care programs, for families in which both parents are working. Most of our families now have both parents working. We have about 32 extended care programs, which serve about 1,600 children in the diocese.

Let’s talk about the academic achievement results of these students. More than 90% of our 12th grade students go on to colleges and universities all over the nation including, DeSales University. Our standardized testing program, which is the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, has consistently shown the average achievement level of our students to be in about the top third of the nation. In addition, the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment Tests (PSSA) indicates that our average scores exceed the state standards in every subject and in every grade tested.

All of this academic achievement is accomplished at about half the cost of public schools, at the elementary level, and about two-thirds the cost at the secondary level. For Catholic school students and their parents, the academic achievement is
just one part of the story. Our parents are most interested in building the character of their children, through growth in virtue and moral/spiritual development. These are old-fashioned words, but they are more important today than ever before.

Catholic schools make up most of the non-government schools in Pennsylvania, where we represent about 10% of the enrollment population. Catholic schools also represent the largest non-government school program (K-12) throughout the nation. We provide religious and moral education for students of all faiths and of all backgrounds. The unique mission of sharing the religious and moral values of Jesus Christ has been going on in this area for more than 250 years. The first Catholic school in this area was founded in 1743 by Fr. Theodore Snyder, who was a Jesuit missionary going to Bally from the Reading area. He established our first Catholic school in what was then part of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Catholic education has been going on for more than 2000 years. Catholic schools have been found to be the most effective tool to transmit our Catholic culture and values.

And what are these moral and religious values that we transmit? Here’s a brief sample: Honor and respect your parents. Protect and respect all human life. You heard a lot about that last Thursday evening, when President Bush mentioned it several times in his speech to the United Nations. Protect and respect the property of others. Speak kindly, charitably, and truthfully of your neighbors. When and if you marry, and I’m not advocating it for the clergy here, be faithful to your spouse and honor and respect your neighbor’s spouse. Give honor and glory to God our creator. Love God and respect Him in all you do, in all your words and actions. Worship God on a special day of holiness, Sunday. What I have just stated to you are basic values I’m sure you recognize. They are the Ten Commandments, stated in positive terms in a slightly different order. These are the same Judeo-Christian moral and religious values that our forefathers brought forth in this nation. These are the same values that the immigrants from Europe brought to this country during the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, and are the same values those immigrants took with them as they pushed westward and beyond.

It’s the integration of these moral and religious values with the basic skills of our modern day curriculum that makes up part of the genius of Catholic education. The natural question, which quickly arises, is how do Catholic schools integrate moral and religious values into the modern curriculum? We follow the basic required curriculum of the state of Pennsylvania. But now, let’s go behind the scenes to see how our Catholic schools are so successful in teaching the curriculum.

The major components of the genius of Catholic education consist of the following six elements. All these approaches, I might add, are prohibited from the government schools. They are: carefully selected teachers, a unique curriculum, a very unique school schedule, very unique educational activities, the building of a very unique community, and finally, advocating a very unique role model.
Teachers

My former assistant superintendent for religious education, whom many of you know, is now the abbot of a Trappist monastery in New York, Fr. John Denburger. He had a great saying that he used when he talked to our new teachers: “You cannot share something you do not have.” The point he was making for our new teachers was that they could not share the gospel message and their Judeo-Christian religious and moral values with their students if they didn’t practice them in their own lives.

It is precisely because our Catholic schools are in business to provide a Christian education that we look for teachers who are committed to living the Christian life, who have a knowledge of their Christian faith, who have a knowledge of the scriptures and the life of Jesus, and who are committed to living that life. When recruiting new teachers, and each year we recruit about 80-100 new teachers for our 1100+ teaching staff, we look for two main gifts or talents in the teachers. First of all, do they have the academic background to teach the subjects that they are being asked to teach? Secondly, and more importantly, do they have the knowledge of their faith and the willingness to live that faith and model it for their students? We call this search process the community of faith interview.

Each of my staff got involved in this interview process. We try to determine how comfortable the teacher applicants are in sharing their faith with the young people in their classrooms. In other words, are they living the Christian life? Is prayer a part of their lives? How would they feel about leading their students in daily prayer? How are they nourishing their own spiritual lives? Are they attending weekly liturgy? Are they nourishing their own spiritual lives through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist?

Federal law, as probably all of you know, prohibits discrimination in employment based on one’s religious background. However, what many people forget or are ignorant of is the fact that religious groups are exempt from this federal statute when they are seeking to employ people to further the religious mission of their particular religious group. Since Catholic schools are established to provide a Christian education in the Catholic tradition, we are allowed by law to give preference to teacher applicants who have the knowledge, understanding, and interest, and commitment to live the Christian life.

Some people misunderstand this. About two weeks ago, the Morning Call newspaper refused to print an ad requested by Allentown Central Catholic High School. They were looking for a teacher, and in the ad they wrote, “Preference will be given to a practicing Catholic.” The newspaper refused to print it. We need to educate the reporters and the ad department about federal law in this regard.
To further verify that our teacher applicants have the knowledge and commitment to live the Christian life, we ask them to give us employment references from their local pastors or clergy. A number of the applicants are very surprised when we ask for this because we want to find out from their own pastors or ministers how well they are doing as far as practicing their faith.

It is not easy to find such teachers in this day and age, people who are willing and are knowledgeable about their Catholic faith. Many of the graduates of our teacher training institutions in the public sector have no formal education or lack any in-depth knowledge of their religious faith. We provide formal retreats and days of recollection and have a formal catechist formation program for all of our lay teachers as an ongoing professional development program for our teachers. We are looking to hire teachers who are willing, have the knowledge, and have the commitment to live the Christian faith. It is very difficult to get this type of teachers from the public sector, especially when all expression of spirituality and religion has been so excluded in the public schools. However, those students who have had some Catholic education, or other religious formation programs, are better prepared to teach in Catholic schools. And that’s why we are so interested in hiring graduates from DeSales University. As I understand from Fr. DiMauro, several student teachers from DSU are being placed this year at our secondary schools.

The extent to which a Catholic school carefully and actively recruits teachers who are willing to live their faith will determine, in large measure, their success as a Catholic educational program.

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**Curriculum**

Let us now review the unique curriculum. For those of you who received perfect attendance certificates in the diocese of Allentown, you attended 182 days of school. The state requires 180, but we added two more for good measure. That amounts to about 36 school weeks throughout the year. What many people do not realize is that our unique religious curriculum is taught every one of those 36 weeks and almost every day of those 182 days in the school year. It is a religion curriculum carefully planned to present the teachings of Jesus and the history and traditions of the Catholic Church, including the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps you can now appreciate why we look so carefully for the type of teachers we are going to employ because, at the elementary level, we are asking these lay teachers to teach this religious curriculum in their local classrooms.

Let me give you a brief overview of this religious curriculum. At the Kindergarten level, we begin to teach the concept of Christian love, caring for oneself and one’s neighbor (hopefully to cut down on some of the fights they might have with one another!). We also introduce the Christian concept of being sorry, if you are unkind
or hurtful to another individual. Parents and grandparents, you may be able to appreciate us as your child or grandchild experiences kindergarten because at least when they are mischievous, they begin, perhaps, saying they’re sorry afterwards. The most important thing that we teach at the kindergarten level is that God is our creator and the ultimate source of the gift of life.

By the way, kindergarten was the only class in my entire educational career that I was not promoted! That was always hard for me to talk about. But I went to a public school. (There was no Catholic kindergarten in Buffalo, New York, where I grew up.) When I completed my kindergarten program, I was only four years old, and they would not let me go to first grade at this young age. So they made me repeat a grade and they called it pre-primer, which means that I failed kindergarten! Try explaining that to your children or friends.

In the primary grades (1-3), we begin teaching the sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation, and the Eucharist. We introduce the children to the rich prayer life of the Church, teaching the sign of the cross and basic prayers, like the Our Father, the Hail Mary, etc.

During the middle grades (4-6), we begin teaching the various parts of the Bible, especially the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments. We expand the child’s prayer life, teach the Rosary, and introduce what the Mass and Sunday liturgy is all about.

At the junior high level, students are beginning to enter adolescence, that period which Bishop McShea was so fond of calling “a period of temporary insanity.” We study all the sacraments as special ways to receive God’s graces. We also begin studying the New Testament in detail and the life of Christ. We begin introducing higher levels of instruction, such as respect for justice and respect for life at all levels and a little bit of Church history.

I’ve taken the time to give you a brief sampling of our religion curriculum because many parents don’t realize that religion is a major part of our curriculum. Many times I have had parents come to me and say, “Well, I’d like to send my children to Catholic school, but they’re not Catholic, so can we just skip the religion program?” I had to explain that it was integrated into our educational program and it was not possible to separate it.

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**Schedule**

Let me talk for a moment now on the unique school schedule. Our very unique curriculum is tied to a very unique school schedule. It follows the Church calendar. In other words, every Catholic school schedule includes preparation for and
liturgical celebrations for the Church seasons of the year: Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter time, together with all the major feast days, such as All Saint's Day, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Christmas, Ascension, as well as other feast days such as the Feast of St. Joseph, St. Patrick, or whatever ethnic saint the local parish might be named for.

Catholics often take for granted the powerful, instructional role of our sacred liturgy. The gospel readings are somewhat continuous, as all of us know, from week to week. Cycle A includes Matthew’s gospel, Cycle B Mark’s gospel, and Cycle C the gospel of Luke. During Advent and Lent, we read St. John’s gospel. So every time you stand to listen to the gospel, you are listening to the ongoing story of our most precious writings. And every three years, if you realize it or not, you will have completely reviewed all four gospels describing the life of Christ and His teachings. This is our Church calendar.

Over the course of thirteen years in our Catholic elementary and secondary schools, a student will have reviewed all four gospels at least four times. Once as a primary student, once as a middle school student, once as a junior high student, and once at the senior high level. As government schools are struggling to be allowed to sing a single Christmas hymn or allowed to have a manger scene in their school, our Catholic schools are openly, freely, and fully celebrating the liturgical seasons of our Church calendar. They experience the richness of our Catholic history and tradition. We are helping the students choose the Christian life as their own. This is part of the genius of Catholic education.

I cannot guarantee, though I wish I could, that all of our students, when they graduate, will live the Christian life every day of their lives. I think the local papers take actual glee whenever they can print a front-page story showing some scandal involving a Catholic school student. That’s one of my concerns that I so willing pass on to Phil Fromuth, my successor -- reading the morning paper, each day, and wondering which of my 17,000 students was involved in mischief last evening! But research has shown that our graduates do have a higher sense of basic moral values and Christian values than government school students. This is part of the genius of Catholic education.

Activities

Let’s talk for a few moments about the unique educational activities. The genius of Catholic education extends beyond the formal curriculum and the unique educational schedule. It includes the unique activities, which we plan for our students. We are calling them to a way of life. Our students participate in days of recollection and retreats to help them reflect on the teachings of Jesus and how to apply them to their own daily lives. We also engage them in missionary activities
and service projects so that they can begin to feel the need of their neighbors and people throughout the world and how they can fulfill those needs. We ask them to help support the missionaries and teach them a little bit about what these courageous people are doing throughout the world.

One of my fondest memories as Secretary of Education was all that our schools and parishes did for the missionary work of my brother, a Jesuit missionary in Lagos, Nigeria. Through the generosity of our students and the parishioners in the diocese of Allentown, he literally built two Catholic schools in Lagos. We were the major resource that helped him do it. One of our high schools donated the library books that still fill his Catholic school library in Nigeria. All of this is helping African young people who live in poverty to learn about the Lord and become educated. So where there were virtually no schools, today both Muslims and Catholics attend Catholic schools daily because of our generosity.

You might recall, when you went through Catholic school, the missionary program called “Adopt a Pagan Baby.” Do you remember those campaigns of the holy child association? Well, we still have similar programs, which give the children a real awareness of the needs of our fellow brothers and sisters throughout the world, and how they can fulfill those needs. At the secondary level, all of our students are required to participate in service projects in order to be graduated from our Catholic high schools. While the public schools were recently dragged into court for requiring service projects, our students have been doing service projects for decades. It gives them wonderful opportunities to see how they can be of help to their neighbors. The integration of service and charity into the daily experience of a child’s education is another aspect of the genius of Catholic education.

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**Community**

Let me talk about building a faith community. The life of a Catholic school student is integrated into local parish life in many different ways, which are carefully planned by the school and the parish officials. Receiving the first sacraments of the Eucharist, Penance, and later Confirmation, become both a school and a parish celebration. The students are partly prepared in the schools and partly prepared in the parish as well. Most generally when they receive the “first” sacraments, it is part of a local parish celebration.

There are many other ways in which the student’s life is integrated with the parish life. Many times the students get involved with visiting nursing homes, and visiting the elderly at Christmas time, participating in special liturgies during holy week, devotions to our Blessed Lady during the month of May. Students may help prepare and print the bulletin on the weekends to be helpful to the pastors. Some students may set up furniture for parish events such as picnics, or dances and all
manner of parish activities. They often help as servers at Mass and various prayer services or sing in the parish choir. Coleman’s research at the University of Chicago found that this sense of community, stemming from being an integral part of a larger Christian community, is what has made Catholic education so effective, especially for inner city children whose lives are frequently lived in families broken up by poverty.

The integration of school life with parish life is a very important aspect of the genius of Catholic education. It enables students to actively participate in the building of a Christian community. Since Catholic education is a mission of the Church, we work in partnership with pastors to serve the local church in a variety of ways. These experiences can have a profound, positive effect on the students. In Catholic terms: “It takes an entire parish to raise and educate a child.” This is a vital part of the genius of Catholic education. Students may be graduated in nine or twelve years from their local Catholic schools, but they can be an active part of parish life, wherever they live, for the rest of their lives. They know that the local parish community needs them and that they can make it their spiritual home, anywhere in the world.

Advocating a Unique Role Model

My final point about the genius of Catholic education actually ties together all of my previous points. When you reflect on what the genius of Catholic education is, we are actually advocating a unique role model for modern life. In summary:

- We employ teachers who are willing to model the Christian life.
- We present the teachings of Jesus and the Church He founded in a religion curriculum that offers these values as a way of life.
- We integrate the schedule of our students’ school life with the ongoing Church calendar.
- We encourage prayer and reception of the sacraments to nourish their spiritual lives.
- We encourage participation in mission activities and service projects to nourish charity in their hearts as a way of life to help their neighbors.
- We involve them in a myriad of ways in parish life to teach them what it is to belong to a larger Christian community and to be a vital part of the community.

When you think about what constitutes the genius of Catholic education, you realize that the entire focus is on Jesus Christ. He is the role model that we offer to our students – not Tom Hanks or Michael Jordan or the MTV stars, but Jesus Christ. We actually are radical enough to do that every single day, in a planned and integrated way for each and every child that attends our schools. We offer His
teachings, His prayer life, the traditions of the Church He founded, and practical ways to live their own lives around these teachings. We offer them models of people who live this life, and we offer to help them when they fail to hit the mark.

In summary, a Catholic education provides high academic expectations, an orderly and loving environment in which to grow academically, morally, and spiritually, and an entire parish community to support students in their spiritual journey.

The results of Catholic education are profound. If you are following Jesus, you are not doing drugs. If you are following Jesus, you do not harass, bully, or make fun of others. If you are following Jesus, you are concerned about your neighbors in school, in your family, in your neighborhood, and in the world. If you are following Jesus, you will respect life and nourish your own life to its fullest potential. If you are following Jesus, you will respect the lives and property of others.

A few years ago, the motto that was used in one of the marketing campaigns for Catholic education said: “There’s more to learn in Catholic schools.” This is true. We provide our students with the best possible academic education, as a given. But then we give them so much more. We offer them a way of life, a Christian, Catholic way of life, one that follows the unique and radical role model of Jesus Christ. This is the genius of Catholic education!

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**Conclusion (Fr. Dailey)**

Well, Jim I know I put you under a lot of pressure when I announced that you would be the lecturer before you knew it, but I think you nailed it this time. And we are most appreciative. In fact, I’m not even sure if you realize something you said that I think contributes to the genius of Catholic education and I’m not sure if you caught it. When Dr. Cusimano referred to the 19,000 students in the system as ‘our’ students. When the Secretary of Education and the Superintendent of schools considers each of 19,000 pupils his students, I can see Mother Aviat, St. Aviat, saying that’s exactly how we need to treat them. And that’s the genius, certainly part of the genius, of Catholic education. I think you nailed it. Thank you.

And thank you all for being a part of this little history here, the first of what we hope will be an annual lecture in and around this time of year, honoring the birthday (September 16th) of St. Leonie de Sales Aviat. We thank you for coming and invite you to next year’s lecture, which will take place on the third Monday in September. We also invite you to participate in any/all of the programs sponsored by the Salesian Center for Faith and Culture. You are most welcome to visit our beautiful campus at any time! Please arrive home safely. Good night.