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The Dynamics of Catholic School Leadership

The challenges facing Catholic K-12 education and the necessary response from Catholic higher education

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I would like to first thank Fr. Thomas Dailey and the Salesian Center for Faith and Culture for inviting me to deliver the Anthony Ruggiero Lecture on Catholic education here at DeSales University. It is clear to me that what I will be sharing with you here tonight may be a bit of preaching to the choir, but if it reminds us of the challenges facing Catholic K-12 education, the dynamics of leadership that is necessary, and also recommits us to Catholic K-12 education, then I believe that I will have accomplished my goal.

What I would like to share with you this evening is a very brief analysis of the dynamics of Catholic school leadership by examining the current challenges facing Catholic K-12 education and then to discuss the necessary response that Catholic higher education ought to take to assist Catholic K-12 education during this time of crisis. Our current challenges are best understood by placing them within a larger historical context, consequently my analysis will draw on historical antecedents and the larger forces that both illuminate and helped create the current reality.
By analogy, I intend to not only give you the weather report (in case you were wondering...its pretty stormy for Catholic schools with even larger devastating storms heading our way), but to provide you with information about the jet-stream, the underlying reality that produces the weather. Fortunately, I also will give you some information about how we might alter the jet stream to produce better weather, something the weatherman can't deliver.

In an Ode to my classical Jesuit education and to Caesar's Gallic wars; my presentation, like Gaul, is divided into three parts:
I will provide data and research that frames the current reality and illuminates the forces behind the loss of market share and the closure of Catholic schools.

I will discuss the implications for Catholic school leadership and what can be done to weather the storm and maybe even alter the jet-stream that produces the current reality. Finally, I will discuss what Catholic higher education can do to assist Catholic K-12 education that might in turn help us to more faithfully live our Mission.

The reasons for the loss of market share and closure are pretty well known. They include demographics and migration, leadership, financial issues, and the changing face of American Catholicism. Taken collectively these shape our current reality, and provide some guidance in how we might alter the prevailing jet-stream.

Demographics indicate that birth-rates alone do not account for the loss of Catholic school enrollment and certainly not market share. If it were merely a function of lower birth rates we wouldn't expect to see a large change in enrollment since 1980.
The CARA study (2006) reports: “Demographic shifts – ‘people moved and schools didn’t” – have proven to be the most critical reason for enrollment losses and school closures”

This phenomenon was observed by Harris who in 1996 reported that the City of Cleveland lost 409,192 residents between 1950 and 1990, while Cuyohoga County grew by 432,000. In 1950, average parish membership in the city and in the
suburbs were 2668 and 2488 respectively; by 1990 the city parishes had dropped to an average of 1666 while the suburban parish had more than doubled to 5617.

McClellan noted that The 20 dioceses with the greatest Catholic school enrollment, that typically have large urban centers, accounted for 62% of the national Catholic school enrollment in 1940, but only 42% by 1990. The phenomenon was not lost on Cardinal Stritch of Chicago who also noted it while it was happening. He observed: “[The city of Chicago] is emptying out into its suburbs. Thousands and thousands are going out into little homes in the suburban areas...New parishes are needed, new schools are needed and of course new priests are needed”

Leadership issues also play a role in the current crisis. Some prelates like Cardinal Ritter of Saint Louis halted construction of all new Catholic schools until pastors could organize schools with forty-nine or fewer students per classroom and a ratio of three religious to every lay teacher. He was hardly alone. The noted Sociologist Andrew Greeley leveled several criticisms at Church leadership: “Somehow, by a process not yet clear to me, the decision was made by bishops and priests that no more new Catholic schools were to be built, and that C.C.D. was to become the de facto substitute for schools”

He later writes: “Changes in the administration and financing of Catholic education would be absolutely imperative to making such funds available, but there is so much caution and fear and mediocrity in the leadership of the American church that it seems much easier to close schools down or to refuse to build new ones than to risk innovative techniques of administering and funding Catholic schools.” Financial Issues also played a role: A summary report on Catholic education in Saint Louis from 1970 reports that: “Enrollment declines cannot be attributed to the costs of Catholic education, for the users of the schools pay for less than 20 percent of the operating costs of the schools through tuition and related payments.” Things changed pretty rapidly.

The loss of religious teaching in schools continued to decline nationally at an alarming rate. These teachers had to be replaced by lay people who required salaries and benefits. The percentage of religious teaching in schools dropped from 48.4% in 1970 to 3.7% in 2010. During this same period, contributions to the Church began to drop off as well. In the early 1960s Catholics gave approximately the same percentage of income to their church as mainline Protestants (about 2.2% for both groups), but by the late 1970s and through the 1980s Protestant giving as a percentage of income had remained relatively constant at 2.2%, while Catholic giving had been cut in half to about 1.1%

Market demands also necessitated smaller class sizes and more specialty teachers in subjects such as computers, foreign language, and learning consultants.
Student to faculty ratios in Catholic grade schools dropped from 20:1 in 1990 to 15:1 in 2010. The additional staff obviously comes at a cost. Lay teachers are paid significantly less than public school teachers, but over time, the market demanded that Catholic school teachers be paid a salary more commensurate with their potential earnings in public schools. In 1990, the average Catholic elementary school teacher salary was 53% of the national public school teacher average, now it is closer to 70%.

Parishes continued to subsidize Catholic education, but with the school operation growing at a rate of 7.2% annually for the last 20 years, parish contributions couldn’t keep up. Increased contributions from the parish have become an increasingly larger piece of the parish expenses and an increasingly smaller slice of the school income. This phenomenon is shown graphically here by examining the longitudinal data. Even with increased contributions, the percentage of income obtained by schools from parishes has dropped, and the percentage of income obtained from parents through tuition has increased. Harris correctly notes; “Catholic schools have evolved from a Church funded endeavor managed by professed religious to a system of largely parent-funded programs for a diminishing portion of the Catholic school population.”

Tuition now represents over 60% of the operational income of Catholic grade schools, and a much higher percentage for Catholic high schools (a far cry from the 20% cited in the Saint Louis Summary Report of 1970). Unfortunately both operations continue to grow at rates well above inflation. The national average for tuition in a Catholic elementary school has risen from $924 in 1988 to $3,159 in 2008, an average increase of 6.3% per year, every year, for the last 20 years. The national average for the cost to educate a student in a Catholic elementary school has risen from $3,159 per pupil in 1988 to $5,870 per pupil in 2008, an increase of 7.2% per year, every year, for the last 20 years. These numbers are staggering! Not surprisingly, The CARA study found that among Catholic parents of elementary-aged children who did not have their children in Catholic schools, a full 76% cited “could not afford tuition” as a reason.

The last reason for the loss of market share and closure of Catholic schools is what might be called the Changing face of American Catholicism; A reality that will continue to confront the Church in the coming decades. Catholics were not exactly welcomed to these shores when we arrived. In 1800 Catholicism was a small and insignificant denomination. By 1860 Catholicism had grown 900%, becoming the largest denomination in the country, numbering 3.1 million. By 1890 Catholicism numbered 9 million adherents. The “foreign” nature of Catholicism spawned great fear and fueled the Nativist movement.

American Catholics, from Charles Carroll to John Kennedy, have always had to go one step further to prove their American loyalty. John Carroll was the only
Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence who consequently felt compelled to also provide his place of residence on the document, presumably to avoid confusion when the British troops came to execute the signers for treason. Catholics, Protestants, and Jews fought side by side during World War II, and were rewarded with the GI bill that enabled many children of Catholic immigrants to go to college. This education provided upward mobility and the possibility of a new home in the suburbs. Catholic Universities, operating within this same milieu, felt compelled to declare themselves true universities, articulated through the Land of Lakes declaration.

Dolan remarks: “These suburbanites were better educated than their parents and had become members of the rapidly emerging professional and managerial class that had taken hold in the 1950s. Their move into the suburbs signaled the arrival of Catholics into the mainstream of society.” Additional societal forces were also at work. According to the Gallup Poll, the influence of religion on American life had decreased dramatically between 1957 and 1968, with a full 67% believing that religion was losing its influence.

The reasons given are quite interesting: young people losing interest in formal religion, growing immorality, violence, materialism, the Church is not keeping up with the times; the Church is too involved in social and political issues. Vatican II also occurred during this time period which helped define the relationship between the Church and the world, and articulated a universal call to holiness and a call for laity to take a greater role in the church and the world.

So what does this mean for Catholic schools that were originally built as a bulwark against the larger hostile culture? Now that the “ghetto walls were crumbling” and Catholics had moved securely into the mainstream, and were called upon to take a larger role in the Church and in the world, such a paragon of parochialism represented for many an anachronistic relic from a bygone era that was no longer necessary and no longer worth the cost. In 1964, Mary Perkins Ryan, a stay-at home mother, published a book titled: Are Catholic Schools the Answer? Her analysis offered a definitive “NO!” The Catholic school was parochial in the pejorative sense, was an obstacle to witnessing the presence of Christ in the world, and represented an expense that siphoned more and more parish resources on fewer and fewer children.

During the period from 1965 to 1975, Catholic school enrollment dropped precipitously in both Catholic elementary and secondary schools. The numbers in CCD did not appear to absorb all these kids, so what was going on? The Catholic bishops commissioned a study in 1975 to discover where they all went? The report, titled Where are the 6.6 million?, concluded that the number of Catholic elementary and secondary age children and youth not receiving formal religious education rose
from 3.1 million in 1965 to 6.6 million in 1974” These uncatechized millions are now the parents of our current K-12 population.

History repeats itself with a new wave of Catholics who are immigrants or children of immigrants. Our Catholic bishops have observed that:
“As we continue to address the many and varied needs of our nation’s new immigrant population, the Church and its schools are often among the few institutions providing immigrants and newcomers with a sense of welcome, dignity, community, and connection with their spiritual roots.” They also admonish us to have our Catholic parishes and schools reflect this reality and reach out and welcome Hispanics and Latinos into the Catholic faith communities in the United States.

The stakes for the Church in the United States are high. We have at least 6.6 million Catholics who are now the parents of our K-12 aged children that have not received any formal instruction in the faith. We have more young people who are indifferent to the faith and are not baptizing their children, or baptizing their children because it seems to be important to grandma and grandpa, a statistic called grandparent baptisms that is now an official statistic on the status animarum in the Archdiocese of Saint Louis.

What we have here is probably the most distressing statistic that I have come across in all my data gathering. It shows clearly that while the population of the counties comprising the Archdiocese of Saint Louis has grown, the Catholic population has not. We are called to be an evangelizing people, yet this piece of data is clearly showing that we are not. What does all this mean for the dynamics of Catholic school leadership? It requires bold, even heroic leadership around three themes.

**Educate & Engage**

We must abandon the paternalistic paradigm of Catholic school management passed on to us from earlier generations. We’re dealing with an educated and professionally trained laity that can be informed of and engaged in the challenges that we currently face. We must face these challenges collectively. Many of the longitudinal trends that I shared with you, particularly the dramatic rise in tuition, are playing themselves out in many parish schools across the country and will engulf them before they are able to effectively act.

We must educate and engage our parents, parishioners, and people of good will to become engaged in the problems currently facing Catholic education. Far too many people believe that tuition covers the full cost of the education that they receive. We have also created a fee for service, quid pro quo mentality with our parents who are supposed to be the primary educators of their children in the faith.
If we treat them as stakeholders, they are more likely to become engaged. Those who are engaged are more likely to provide the leadership necessary to solve many of these problems through their time, talent, and treasure. We have become administrators of schools rather than leaders of the most successful evangelical tool of the Church for more than two centuries. We need schools that are not only viable, but robust; Schools that attract young people and their parents into the life of the parish; Schools that tap into the skills and talents of parishioners around a vision of evangelization.

Mobilize & Act
We must mobilize our people into action around systems that sustain robust Catholic schools. This may mean alternative forms of governance, alternative forms of financing, advancement, recruitment, marketing, and yes tax-credits. We must help parents claim back the right to direct the education of their children as they see fit through tax credits. It is a fundamental issue of social justice, an issue of parental rights, and now more than ever, an issue of fiscal responsibility on the part of the State.

Call to Holiness & Evangelization
In short, we Americans were once a persecuted immigrant population in a hostile land finding our way. We built our Catholic schools as a bulwark against the hostile culture to protect our young and our faith. However a strange thing happened over the years. The hostile culture was apparently tamed and was no longer overtly hostile. We Catholics crawled from our immigrant ghettos and proved our Americanism. We pursued the American dream, purchased homes in the suburbs, and became disengaged with our Church. The parish has been replaced by the elite soccer league, the new axis around which our lives revolve. We then allowed our Catholic schools to no longer be built and to close down.

The challenges we didn’t see nor address were secular humanism, rugged individualism, and paganistic hedonism. While the Church was basking in the success of rapid growth, and peak Catholic school enrollment in the mid 1960s, the jet stream was building up in intensity to create the massive storm we finally recognized in Catholic education in the late 1960s and 1970s and still experience today.

I contend that the challenges facing Catholic schools is a crisis, but it is also a symptom of a much larger crisis of faith in the Church, whose seeds and roots go back to the experience of American Catholics decades and even a century earlier. This is our story as American Catholics: A people in need, turn to God, make sacrifices, and find success. Unfortunately this success turns into individual and institutional hubris, a lack of reading the signs of the times, and ultimately to missed opportunities and some degree of failure.
Does this story sound familiar? This is the cliff-notes version of the entire Old Testament. It is the story of Salvation history. Only now it’s playing itself out here in America

We must respond to the universal call to holiness beginning with ourselves. We must be an evangelizing people and a beacon of hope to those who are hopeless and lost in the emptiness of our society that preaches secular humanism, rugged individualism, and paganistic hedonism. He must boldly proclaim to parents that we believe that their child is a child of God, and that our entire parish community, not just the school community, would like to help them raise their child to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Finally, as an active member of this faith community, we also invite you to grow in your own faith and to share your time, talent, and treasure to make sure that we reach even more children and families with this message of the love of Jesus Christ. This is our value proposition to parents, the community, and to the nation.

I dare say that the crisis facing K-12 Catholic schools is also a challenge afflicting many Catholic colleges as well. Are not our students the products of the same environment, only a bit further along the time continuum? Is Catholic higher education aware of the crisis? Does Catholic higher education consider it a problem worthy of our attention? Does Catholic higher education believe that it has a significant role to play? I believe that our willingness to even try to assist might even be the recipe for our own salvation and means of finding our soul.

We need to recognize our interdependency and shared mission. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to reach out to K-12 Catholic education and to listen...Once we listen, we might discover that we have something to offer.

The Holy Trinity of higher education (teaching, research, and service) must be brought to bear on the problems facing Catholic education. We must attend to the formation and education of souls who will assume positions of leadership in the Church and society, to finding solutions to the most vexing problems facing humanity, and to providing service to the Church and the larger community.

The Catholic bishops recently recognized the contributions of Catholic colleges and universities that provide specialized training programs for teachers and administrators, but we must do more.

The Catholic bishops have asked us to offer programs that produce graduates who are knowledgeable in matters of our faith and professionally trained. A number of Catholic colleges and universities have come together in their commitment to Catholic education and created national programs and consortia that continue to grow.
At Saint Louis University we have a program in collaboration with the Archdiocese of Saint Louis to train administrators specifically for leadership in Catholic schools. This has grown into a doctoral degree. We also have an MA program for teachers of religion in Catholic schools. We hope to soon add a general education MA program for teachers, a BA program for teachers, and a volunteer corps to provide more teachers for underserved Catholic schools.

Research is a particularly important role for Catholic higher education. Catholic schools don’t think longitudinally nor do they have the resources for a research and development department….That’s our job! There is some excellent scholarship on Catholic schools in Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice, the only peer-reviewed journal in the United States dedicated to Catholic education.

We must encourage individual faculty members and Centers of Catholic education to provide service and professional consulting for Catholic schools.

Ultimately institutional relationships between Catholic higher education and Catholic K-12 education will help us both achieve our missions, support the Church in her evangelical mission, and draw more souls to Jesus Christ by being living examples of the universal call to holiness and the devout life. A message that Saint Francis DeSales delivered 400 years ago and DeSales University continues to proclaim to this day.