What sort of a tale have we fallen into?

THE FUTURE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS
IN THE UNITED STATES

14 September 2009

Five years ago, I took my then seven-year old son, Joe, to Detroit for a weekend of major league baseball. His beloved Red Sox were in town for a weekend series against the Tigers, and our time together became a memory I'll never forget. We got to our hotel not far from Comerica Park in time for the obligatory swim in the hotel pool. Then we arrived at the ballpark in time to watch the great Pedro Martinez warm up in the bullpen on his way to a dominant performance and a Sox victory. Back at the hotel we ate pizza on the bed while watching Sports Center. What could be better for a father and son? Sunday’s game was even more exciting, as the Red Sox gave up six home runs but still managed to win a wild game, 11-9. Much as I love baseball, however, the highlight of the weekend turned out to be our experience Sunday morning at St. Aloysius Church, right there on Washington Avenue.

I had to admit some surprise when the desk clerk at the hotel told us that the closest Catholic Church was only a few blocks away, for even though the city was trying to renew the neighborhood in preparation for the Super Bowl and the All-
Star game, the area around the hotel was still quite depressed, with burned out buildings outnumbering open businesses. Still, we followed her directions and traipsed over to Mass, where a vibrant and diverse congregation welcomed us enthusiastically both before and after the liturgy. “People here are so friendly,” commented my son as we walked to the ballpark.

I begin with this story of St. Aloysius Church because it represents for me the power, resilience, and commitment of the Catholic Church, which often stays in neighborhoods abandoned by most civic and commercial institutions. When Detroit fell on hard times from the late 1960s onward, when businesses shut their doors and people who could afford to do so fled the central city, St. Aloysius stayed. That story of tenacity is repeated across our country, especially in the form of Catholic schools that, in many cases, minister heroically to the poor and marginalized, offering them educational opportunity, to be sure, but more importantly, offering them daily opportunities to encounter the Gospel and its message of hope. Indeed, I firmly believe that the most important and successful ministry of the Church is its schools. But as we know well, these schools, especially those in urban areas, are increasingly at risk. My hope is that we, as a Church and a country, can somehow avoid the observation made by folk singer Joni Mitchell (and here I date myself): “Don’t it always seem the same, that you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone?”

The title of tonight’s talk is a quote taken from the great Catholic writer, JRR Tolkien. Weary and frightened on their perilous quest to Mt. Doom, Sam and Frodo, led by the untrustworthy Gollum, halt briefly to gather a some precious rest before they enter Mordor. There they have a conversation about how they have ended up in this predicament, as Sam observes: “And we shouldn’t be here at all, if we’d known more about it before we started. But I suppose it’s often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo; adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folks seem to have been just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t…. I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?”

The story of Catholic schools in the United States is a glorious, even heroic tale. We take strength from the past and the knowledge that our forebears built what still remains the largest private school system in the world. But we also have to confront the realities of the past 40 years—shrinking enrollments, school closures,
diminished vocations, loss of nerve on the part of many bishops, priests and laity, and plenty of doubt about whether these schools can and should be preserved. It’s a story we know well, perhaps too well for our own good. Over forty years after their peak enrollment of over 5 million, Catholic elementary and secondary schools now serve half as many students even as the Catholic population has soared. Another painful round of school closures over the past decade (over 1500) has erased the modest enrollment increases during the prosperous 1990s. Signs of doom abound: The religious are fading. Pastors are overwhelmed. Mass attendance is down. So are collections. Teachers’ salaries are too low. Tuition is too high. Thus goes the litany.

And so to borrow from old Samwise, Frodo’s steadfast and ever-hopeful companion, “What sort of a tale have we fallen into” with respect to Catholic schools? Are their futures doomed to continued enrollment losses and closure until only a relative few boutique schools remain, serving either the affluent or the very poor who are supported by the generosity of Church and civic benefaction? Must we resign ourselves to fewer, less vibrant, and less influential Catholic schools? In light of these grim statistics and trends, we might wonder, is it even possible for those of us who see Catholic schools as “national treasures” to dream of a bright future of fully enrolled, vibrant, financially stable schools serving all manner of children? In short, has this tale of decline become so familiar that we might risk forgetting that its ending is not inevitable?

To understand the present and to imagine the future, it helps to have a sense of history, to know the causes of the current plight of Catholic schools. And we know the causes, don’t we? Demographic shifts from cities to suburbs, the entry of Catholics into mainstream American culture, the sudden and dramatic downturn in religious vocations and the accompanying loss of leadership and (we must be blunt) cheap labor, the rise of secularism and consumerism. To what extent, however, might we acknowledge this familiar storyline but see it with fresh eyes? When viewed in light of the sudden emergence of daunting challenges that began to confront Catholic schools in the late 1960s, the common focus on school closures as signs of an irreversible trend can obscure the impressive tenacity of these institutions to adapt, survive, and even flourish in a period of tumultuous change. How many organizations would still be in business, as it were, after the near complete change to a more expensive (yet still underpaid) leadership and labor force, loss of major segments of its market vis-a-vis the central value proposition of its product? Can we see the last 40 years, for all the losses, as a tale of remarkable resilience? If the last decade has seen the largest number of school closures in the last forty years, it has also seen the greatest number of new schools built and opened (almost 300). These signs give us hope, though it would be foolish to deny the gravity of the crisis. If we maintain the “business as usual” approach, our schools will continue to disappear.
Why should we be concerned? Why should we care? There are some who argue that Catholic schools have lived out their purpose in the United States. After all, John F. Kennedy was elected president almost fifty years ago, and Catholics are no longer discriminated against. Many other Catholics are, frankly, too disengaged or even asleep to argue. I suppose their tacit assumption is that the value proposition of Catholic schools is no longer compelling in large part because the Church has diminished relevance in their own lives. Indeed, the only reason that the Catholic population in the United States has remained stable is because the numbers of people who are leaving the Church (largely Catholics of European extraction) are balanced by the influx and growth of the Latino peoples, the majority of whom are Catholic.

We should care because these schools are good for the Church—they hold the best hope of preparing a new generation of leaders, practicing Catholics who are, research shows, more generous with their time, talent, and treasure, more involved in parish life. We should care because these schools are good for the country—research shows that they form good citizens committed to the common good. We should care fundamentally because these schools are proven to transform the lives of the children they serve. Catholic schools are instruments of grace, places where students encounter the liberating embrace of Jesus Christ, counter-cultural in the best sense in that they educate with a view to the whole person.

This has certainly been the message of the bishops of the United States for the past 35 years, with the publication of To Teach as Jesus Did and subsequent pastoral statements from the USCCB, most recently in 2005 with Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium. In this, their most recent pastoral statement, they argue prophetically: “We believe that the time has come to revisit and reaffirm our commitment to Catholic elementary and secondary schools as invaluable instruments in proclaiming the Good News from one generation to the next.” In this document they forcefully argue that “Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the fourfold purpose of Christian education, namely, to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed, community in Christ is experienced, service to our sisters and brothers is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of God is cultivated.”

How should we proceed? What can we do to re-write our chapter in the tale into which we have fallen? As a response to the invitation in Renewing our Commitment for Catholic higher education to do more for K-12 Catholic schools, the University of Notre Dame convened a national task force to study the problems and make recommendations. That report, Making God Known, Loved, and Served: The Future of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the United States,
identified four great areas of need for Catholic schools: strengthening Catholic identity, assuring academic excellence, finding and forming transformative leaders and educators, and resolving financial challenges so that schools are accessible to all students. To these four, we now add a fifth, which is signaled by the bishops in *Renewing Our Commitment*. We must find a way to attract and empower the growing Latino population. The future of Catholic schools depends on imagining and enacting solutions to all five challenges. For tonight, I’d like to focus in particular on the last three, and to do so painting a portrait of the present that is both ominous and hopeful at the same time.

1. Finding and forming leaders:

   - Filling the void left by the professed religious remains a central challenge for the Church and its schools.

   - At the same time, the role of the Catholic school teacher and administrator provides an ecclesial “space” where lay people can devote their talents and energy.

   - There is a profound need for formation programs and transformative professional development programs to attract and prepare a new generation of educators to carry on and extend the noble tradition of Catholic schools.

   - Initiatives like Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE program), with their strong partnerships between higher education and dioceses across the nation, represent signs of hope.

   - Consider the growth of ACE and the rise of the University Consortium for Catholic Education (UCCE) with its 15 member institutions, which currently prepare almost 500 teachers annually for service in Catholic schools.

   - Yet a recent study suggests that there is opportunity for tremendous growth here, as specific programs aimed at serving Catholic schools are relatively scarce among the roughly 225 Catholic colleges and universities in the United States. We need to find ways to re-engage Catholic higher education more fully to develop partnerships with Catholic schools and systems.

   - The story of the Catholic Higher Education Collaborative (CHEC) and the fall, 2009 conference at Loyola University Chicago on the formation of Catholic school educators is another sign of hope for the future.
Finding financial solutions that expand access is the most critical, immediate challenge facing Catholic schools. Despite the “lean and mean” nature of Catholic schools—which typically educate students at less than half the cost of public schools—tuition represents a real barrier for too many families, creating in many places, especially urban contexts where parish offertory collections cannot provide meaningful support for the school’s ministry, a cycle of declining enrollments and higher per student costs, even though many in the area would prefer to send their children there if they could afford to do so.

- Publicly and privately funded scholarship programs demonstrate the latent demand for Catholic school education among parents who long to exercise choice over their children’s schooling. There are three main areas of financial support, all of which must be tapped more aggressively and imaginatively: private benefaction (including many non-Catholics who recognize and value the contribution of these schools to American civil society), Catholic giving through the offertory (American Catholics give roughly 1% of their income to the Church, an embarrassing low figure), and public funding (state tax credit programs and voucher programs must be expanded where possible).

- In many cities, especially large metropolitan areas like Chicago and Los Angeles, dioceses have established centralized endowment programs like Big Shoulders and the Catholic Educational Foundation, respectively, that provide vital support for low-income parents to afford Catholic schooling for their children. These programs ought to be established in all dioceses and best practices shared among those who raise funds and distribute them.

- In *Renewing Our Commitment*, the United States bishops insist that support for Catholic schools ought to come from “the entire Catholic community.” Dioceses would do well to consider funding mechanisms for Catholic schools that enact this principle. At present, for example, parishes with schools and parents who choose Catholic schooling for their children bear the brunt of the cost while parishes without schools typically have little obligation to assist the ministry of Catholic schooling through financial support.

- The foundational conviction in the Catholic tradition that the parents are the primary educators of their children and that schools ought to exist in partnership with parents not only underlies the organization and mission of Catholic schools but offers an important counter to what effectively amounts to state usurpation of this parental right and responsibility when
educational choices are functionally eliminated for the poor. Supporters of Catholic schools would do well to advocate more effectively for public programs that foster parental choice. Many have argued that educational opportunity has become the civil rights issue of the 21st century, and Catholic schools, with their legacy of success at educating poor, frequently minority students, have the potential to play a significant role in this struggle for educational freedom and equity.

3. Expanding the role of the Latino community in Catholic schools is vital both for Latino children and families, for our nation, and for our Church. Consider the following data:

- Only three percent of the school-aged Latino children in the United States attend Catholic schools.

- Almost 70 percent of the practicing Catholics in the United States under the age of 35 are Latino.

- Catholic schools have an impressive record of success in serving the Latino population, as Latino’s who attend Catholic schools are two and one half times more likely to complete college than Latinos who do not attend Catholic school.

- The power of Catholic schools to form leaders for the country and the Church is exemplified in the following example. Of the 27 Latino bishops in the United States, 18 attended Catholic schools. Hence, in a population dramatically underrepresented in Catholic schools (3%), fully two-thirds of the Latino bishops experienced Catholic-school formation.

- The bishops recognize the Church’s need to respond in Renewing Our Commitment, and at Notre Dame, we have come to see the challenge and opportunity as so significant and complex that in 2008, Father John Jenkins, CSC, the University’s president, commissioned a national task force to study the participation of Latinos in Catholic schools.

- The report of this national task force, To Nurture the Soul of a Nation, will be published on 12 December 2009, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and will make recommendations for a broad array of stakeholders to take action to double, in ten years, the percentage of Latino children in Catholic schools. The goal, then, is to increase from 300,000 to 1 million the number of Latino children in Catholic schools by 2020.
All of these challenges are inter-related, of course, and we must solve them with imagination and energy if we wish to turn the tide. For all our travails, we have more resources as a Church community than the generations that came before us. Do we have their faith and willingness to sacrifice?

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam’s image of “falling into a tale” is helpful to consider on several levels. First, it acknowledges the fundamental truth that we do not choose our time to enter the story. As he and Frodo talk about their place in the larger story, they experience both humility before their recognition of what we might call Divine Providence and a profound sense of agency that, no matter the time they enter the tale or the outcome of their chapter, they have a part to play and are determined to do their best, even in the face of a seemingly impossible quest. They take solace, certainly appropriate to our own Christian faith and worldview, that the larger story is beyond them, so to speak, and this fact actually *frees* them to act with courage and daring. Though heavily burdened, they do not acquiesce to apathy or cynicism.

As we think of the challenges and opportunities confronting Catholic schools in our time and place, let us take heart from the past and resolve to hope, pray, and work for a brighter future. We owe it to those who came before us, who built gorgeous Churches like St. Aloysius in Detroit and established schools in every corner of the country, all against great odds. More important, we owe it to future generations, to those who will come after us--our children and our children’s children--that they may come to know and live the Gospel in its wonderful fullness and play their own glorious parts in the great story of salvation.