

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at a luncheon honoring Monsignor John F. Meyers, retiring President of the National Catholic Educational Association, National Press Club, Washington, D. C., June 4, 1986)

CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN AMERICA

Catholic education in America is a very complex reality with a rich history. First of all, it is a monumental success story. How else explain that the American Catholic Church is the most practicing Catholic Church in the West? And also, the most generous. Catholic education has taken millions of immigrant children, many with illiterate parents who could barely speak English, and has given them the best opportunity for success in life, which is a good education. The amazing reality is that this problem, on this level of magnitude, faced the Church nowhere else in the world. Why did the American Church provide an effective response to this challenge? Most of the Catholic immigrants came here at the bottom of the social ladder. But they were a self-selected group in that they came seeking a better life, especially for their children and grandchildren. They were mainly poor, but that too was an added incentive to do everything possible to see that their families had a better life than that which they left.

They had their Catholic faith and often they had their native country priests as well. They entered the land of opportunity, but in many ways it was not an easy land. Often Catholics were a despised minority, a true underclass. Often they lived in ghettos. But gradually they built their parishes, often with their own hands. Often enough,

they built a school before they built a church. That happened in my parish, Most Holy Rosary in Syracuse, New York. In fact, we had two schools, one elementary and then a high school, before we had a proper church. For two decades, we worshiped in the school hall.

Our Irish pastor, Father George Mahon, had no doubts about this strategy, both for the parishoners and for the Church. History bore out the rightness of his judgment. On the thirtieth anniversary of the parish, we had thirty-six ordained priests and twenty-eight vowed religious from among our graduates. Most of those who were religious entered into the service of Catholic education on all levels.

The even more amazing fact is that all of my sisters and my brother attended that school for twelve years without paying a cent of tuition, which in many cases, most families, including mine, would have been incapable of paying. How did they do it? No secret here. We were taught, except for one temporary lay teacher, exclusively by religious women who were recompensed by the miserable salary of thirty dollars a month -- and they all had Master's degrees. Their students all did remarkably well on the New York State Regents Exams. When our exams were reviewed by state officials in Albany, we were almost always given higher marks. The Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary had higher standards than the State.

There were no curricular escape routes either. We did all that the Board of Regents demanded and then some: four years of Latin, four of English, three of French, three of History, two or three of Science and Mathematics. Civics, art, drama, and, of course, four

years of religion which, interestingly, also had its standard Regents exam. That really was a core curriculum. When I attended Notre Dame, and later the Gregorian University in Rome where everything was taught in Latin, and lived in a house where the language was French, I found no great difficulty coping. I had early been taught well how to read, how to write, especially how to think.

I mention this personal experience because it illustrates what might be called the Golden Age of Catholic education on the elementary and high school level. It also represents what I know best about the system at these levels, since I passed through it and then moved on to spend the rest of my life in Catholic higher education.

Yet, I cannot ever forget that early experience, for which I will be ever grateful: to a quite uneducated pastor who had a passion for providing education to his young charges, grateful too for those generous and dedicated women who were willingly in the category of slave labor. They also maintained the school and later the church, and inspired many of us to follow their calling to serve Christ in this special way. They were the sacrificial and hidden asset of the whole system. One can, in retrospect, sympathize with their lot, but they accepted it wholeheartedly and did it so well that for many of us aging alumni they continue to be an inspiration.

The Catholic Church in American will be forever in their debt. If we are so much better off today as a Church that has left the ghetto of those days, to these women largely goes the credit. Whenever I hear

European clergymen criticize American religious women, I confess to a kind of incandescent fury. But the record is there, and in the eyes of God, I realize that they need no defense.

At a strategic moment in the history of the Church in America, they rose to the challenge magnificently and left a record that we can only praise nostalgically and thank God for all of them who made it happen. Somewhere, probably here in Washington, probably at the Catholic University, there should be a memorial to capture our wonderment and gratitude for what they did, in large numbers, for the better part of a century. Not that this is our only debt to them, they did much more besides, but today we are speaking of Catholic education which was largely their special domain and their glory.

That Golden Age has passed, but its fruits remain. At its high point, there were six million students in this remarkable system. Now there are only half that number, but the system is responding to new and different needs. If I might remark on a few of the differences, I do so with some diffidence, since I am out of my own field about which I will speak later. However, one must not leave this large and significant part of Catholic education in a limbo following the Golden Age.

In fact, I believe we may still see another and different Golden Age responding to new and different challenges that are facing a Catholic Church far different than it was at the turn of the century, with eight million immigrants arriving at Ellis Island during the first decade of the 1900's, many of them indigent Catholics. Difficult

to believe that when our nation began, there were less than 25,000 Catholics, most of them in Maryland. Only one of them, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, signed the Declaration of Independence. At least he had two distinctions in that august body. He was probably the wealthiest and certainly the only one who gave his address in case the British came looking for the brash signers of a call to independence.

When one looks at the new scene in Catholic elementary and secondary education today, even to a non-expert, several realities stand out.

First, the massive number of religious women, and men too, are simply not there any more. Is this a disaster? I think not. We are in a different age, the age of the laity. A recent massive study of the parish conducted at Notre Dame has documented one among many remarkable facts: 70% of what was formerly done in the parish by the pastor and his assistants is now being done by the lay parishoners. This is especially true of the parish school, if one still exists.

The parishoners are, for the great part, no longer poor. Neither are they, as in the past, largely uneducated. In fact, as Father Greeley's studies have shown, Catholics are now the largest share of students in higher education, matching the percentage of Jews who formerly held this distinction, and in numbers, there are ten times more Catholics than Jews in this country.

Obviously then, the Golden Age has paid off and the laity who were educated and now are successful, are in a position to take upon themselves

the burden of their children's education, in a Catholic manner, in a highly secular society. Catholics are no longer an underclass, but neither are they totally at home with the prevalent value system and rather complete secularity of life in much of America today. If Catholic education was important in a previous age for different reasons, it is no less important in our age for a new set of reasons.

I, for one, strongly believe that the time of closing Catholic elementary and secondary schools is past. Some years ago, a group of parents in a nearby diocese came to me with a problem. They had a fine Catholic school that served several parishes, but was scheduled to be closed by the Bishop because of financial difficulties. Would I speak with him? "No," I said, "you speak with him. They are your children. This school is your concern and your responsibility." "What do we say to him?" they asked. "Very simple," I replied. "Ask him to give you the school. You take on the total responsibility for financing and operating it, but you also assure him that it will continue to be a completely Catholic school." Ten years have passed and the school continues, under lay control, as a fine institution that still educates hundreds of students. I firmly believe that this is the pattern for the future. We have long since gone this route in Catholic higher education.

A few other new developments stand out to any observer of modern Catholic elementary and secondary education. A growing number of teachers and administrators today are laymen and laywomen. I welcome this, since long ago, I did my doctoral thesis in theology on the place of the laity in the Church. I had difficulty getting this subject approved by the

theological faculty at the Catholic University in 1943, since they thought it unimportant. Today, it is all important. But, let me insist that we are in a different age. Lay persons have not taken the vow of poverty and we cannot expect to attract the best of them to our schools if we pay third rate salaries. They deserve what they are worth and who are worth more in our society than those who educate our future citizens and leaders, your children. I realize that this is a national problem in public schools as well, but again, if we want to give our children the best education possible, with values and faith, we cannot do it in economy class. You want the best, you pay for the best. If Catholic parents want the best badly enough, they will pay for the best in education, just as they do in every other category, houses, clubs, cars, food and drink, whatever. I have never found this a problem for Catholic parents who really care and most do. I recall one elementary Catholic school in Los Angeles where many parents were delinquent in paying tuition for their children, but always were paid up at the Los Angeles Country Club. The pastor put a layman in charge. He simply wrote them and asked, what is more important to you -- your children's school ~~and~~ its teachers or the Country Club. They paid up.

This, of course, gives rise to another problem -- most solutions do. There are probably a fourth of Catholics in America today who are economically where most of our parents and grandparents were when the Catholic educational system went into high gear at the turn of the

century. These Catholics, Hispanic, black, and Oriental mainly, are either immigrants or those who have suffered grievous prejudice following slavery. Are we to leave them in the lurch, since they missed the Golden Age when Catholic education was largely free, or are we to use our newfound affluence to care for them as we were cared for in another age?

I think the answer is obvious in a Christian context. Our plans for the survival of Catholic elementary and secondary education for our children must include their children as well. Their faith needs the same kind of support that ours received when it was needed. Again, I am suggesting that the new laity has new responsibilities. It may well be that in this special area of concern, we will again have to depend on the superb generosity and leadership of religious women and men who though fewer in number may again help in their special way to usher in a new Golden Age for a new American people. Can we do less?

Then there is another challenge. There is still another whole category of potential students who just might be saved by Catholic education more than anything else. I am here speaking of the other poor, mainly minorities, mainly blacks, who are not Catholic.

A recent NCEA-Ford Foundation study has documented how wonderfully Catholic schools, especially in black ghettos, are doing in this regard. I have always been amazed, for example, at

the fact that the Archdiocese of Chicago spends eight to ten million dollars a year educating blacks who are not Catholic, and yet, says very little about it. God bless them.

There is one final observation that I would like to make, somewhat reluctantly, as it is political. Given the total performance of Catholic elementary and secondary education in this country, over so many years, I fail to see why so many are so vociferous in objecting to either a voucher or tax credit system for Catholic parents who are, in fact, doubly taxed in the area of education. One of our alumni in California told me that he pays six thousand dollars for public education and another six thousand to educate his children in Catholic schools. At the very least, this sounds unfair. There is obviously a cost to educate one's children, but parents should be free to choose where they pay the cost. They should not have to pay it twice, to the schools that educate their children, and again to other schools.

This is even more cogent if our schools educate a considerable number of students who are not Catholic, but yet in need. No Western nation, to my knowledge, does not recognize the inequity of this situation, except our own. I make this point, although I know that it will not be popular with the liberal establishment to which I generally belong.

Having spoken thus far about Catholic elementary and secondary education, about which I am largely uninvolved, I trust you will indulge me a few observations about Catholic higher education, an

area in which I have spent the greater part of my life.

Unlike Catholic elementary and secondary education which was largely the work of bishops and pastors who owned and operated the many parochial schools that they founded, the whole project of Catholic higher education was, from its founding, largely the work of religious orders of men and women, especially the Jesuits. The only large exception is the Catholic University of America founded by the American hierarchy and which has a pontifical rather than a state charter.

Almost all of higher education in America was founded by religious groups, including Harvard, the first university founded in 1636, although it was at first called a college. The Methodists, for example, founded such well-known universities as Boston University, Syracuse, Northwestern, Southern California, Denver, Duke, and, of course, Southern Methodist.

Most of these early religious foundations just mentioned have only tenuous connections with the religious founders today, largely symbolic and historical. They would all consider themselves secular institutions. There are, of course, several hundred largely smaller colleges which have retained their religious affiliation, but for larger universities the opposite is true.

Catholic colleges and universities in America followed the same route of religious founders, but despite many changes in governance, all of them would today profess to be Catholic institutions of higher learning. There are 235 of them today. A recent study done

for the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities by my colleague, Father Ernest Bartell, finds them strong and growing stronger in comparison with most of their fellow colleges in the Protestant tradition.

It follows from this history that compared to other Catholic universities around the world -- and all of them together could not compare to the American reality -- our Catholic higher education is absolutely unique, both in numbers and quality. With no financial support from the American Church, they have somehow managed to build and sustain themselves in excellence. Because they are not a direct arm of the Church, not owned or operated by the bishops as are parochial schools, they are recipients of federal assistance to the tune of half a billion dollars annually, mainly directed at helping poor students attend them and pay the relatively high tuition costs which largely sustains these institutions. This is why a recent Schema sent for critical comment by the Roman Congregation of Catholic Education was so universally repudiated by the leaders of Catholic higher education who saw in it a serious threat to their historical institutional academic freedom and autonomy. Academic freedom as practiced universally in American higher education is essential to the whole enterprise, impossible without it. Institutional autonomy is essential to federal support. The lack of it is why parochial schools cannot be directly assisted by federal or state funds.

I am sure that the leaders of the American Catholic Church are deeply grateful for the 500,000 students educated in the rich

Catholic tradition annually with no financial cost whatever to the Church. As I said recently in another context, no one who understands this great and gratuitous benefit to the Church would want to jeopardize it.

I believe it is completely understandable that European Churchmen simply do not comprehend this history and this reality of American Catholic colleges and universities because it is alien to their total European or Latin American experience. All Latin American Catholic universities have pontifical charters because those states will not charter them. Catholic universities are by law not allowed in France so there are five Catholic institutes chartered by Rome. The Catholic Universities of Louvain in Belgium are totally financed by the state. There is one Catholic university in Italy which teaches more than ecclesiastical subjects and it too has a pontifical charter. There is one small Catholic university in Germany, recently founded in Eichstatt and totally supported by the Catholic bishops.

How then understand 235 institutions of Catholic higher education here in America teaching over a half million students, founded independently, chartered by the State, recognized as strong colleagues by the total American higher educational community, and costing the Church not a cent? It can only be seen as an integral part of the rich tradition of American freedom and we are grateful for it, and should be.

Another rather unique development began in May of 1967 when Notre Dame and St. Louis University voluntarily placed their

university ownership and governance under lay control with the full approbation of the founding religious orders, Holy Cross and the Jesuits. In our case, we had an indult from Rome to approve the transfer of what amounted to an asset of a half billion dollars. Today, the amount would be double that.

Why did we do it? Fundamentally, we were following the lead of Vatican Council II which declared that laymen in the Church should be given responsibility commensurate with their talent, competence, and dedication. These Trustees were our laymen, they are enormously talented and competent (especially in areas where we were not), totally dedicated to the mission of Catholic higher education. After all, they are mostly our own alumni, we have educated most of them and are now educating their children and grandchildren. Why not entrust the enterprise to their care?

Some said that in the pattern of former Protestant colleges and universities, we would no longer be Catholic. What was overlooked in this equation is that the new owners insisted that the founding community would continue to provide the President (their idea not ours), the total care of ministry at the University, university professors especially in theology and philosophy, and other important academic and administrative personnel as well.

In retrospect, almost twenty years later, I would have to admit that we are, if anything, more professedly Catholic than ever. We have spent many more hours, at their behest, examining the true meaning

of our Catholic character and really doing something about it. We have had two year-long studies on University priorities. In both, the Catholic character of Notre Dame emerged as the primordial priority for the University. Also, they realized that to be both excellent and Catholic required greater resources so they mandated a \$130 million Campaign for Notre Dame which realized \$180 million. Following the second study of priorities, PACE, son or daughter of COUP, they mandated a new campaign for \$300 million and while it is as yet not officially announced, we are about half way to the goal and should be within 75% of the goal when the "Strategic Moment" is announced on my retirement next May.

When the lay Trustees took over in 1967, our University budget was \$29 million. Next year, it will be over \$175 million. Our endowment in 1967 was \$33 million. Today, it is \$380 million. That is quite a switch from days of yore when a \$250,000 income from football was 25% of the annual budget and there was practically no endowment.

It should surprise no one that today practically all of the American Catholic colleges and universities are operating under various forms of lay control and that is perhaps the greatest assurance of their independence and autonomy.

If I were asked, after a lifetime in Catholic education, as a student for twenty years, a university professor five, and university administrator for thirty-seven years, "What is the most important

factor for the future of the whole enterprise?" I would simply say "Guard your Catholic character as you would your life." We receive enormous support because we work hard, in season and out, to be what we profess to be, an excellent university that is profoundly Catholic.

If anyone doubts that, compare the 90% of our students who worship at Mass each Sunday, voluntarily and joyfully, as against the 3% who do so at Europe's leading Catholic university. Consider the more than 2,000 of our students who serve Christ, Our Lord, in His poorest for several hours each week. Consider also that all of our students have twelve hours of good theology and philosophy as a prerequisite for graduation. Many take much more, while in most Catholic universities elsewhere they take little or none. I would finally add that six years after the lay Trustees took over, the University became coeducational, faculty salaries went from the lowest to the top category in the nation, and our scholarship endowment passed \$50 million on its way to \$100.

After taking Cardinal Lustiger of Paris on an extended campus tour this Spring, I asked him what impressed him most. He said, "Not the place, although it is unbelievable, but the faith and devotion of the many students we have encountered," while we toured the Church, the Grotto, the Library and chapels on a busy week day afternoon.

If we preserve our Catholic character in all that we do in education, we will yet write a new chapter, maybe even better than

the Golden Age, in American Catholic education. We will not just survive, but as Faulkner said in receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, "We will prevail" and so will all the good and unusual Gospel values that are at the core of all we do, for the glory of God and the salvation of all His people.

POSTSCRIPT

What should I say to Monsignor John Meyers whose retirement we are celebrating today? He, too, has spent most of his life in this enterprise. If Catholic education boasts a good morale today, and an upward trajectory, and I believe it does, let us give him a large measure of the credit and a word of heartfelt appreciation and thanks. What more can one say? Anything less is unfair, and anything more is still not enough, to thank him adequately.