

Host Presidents' Address: A Discussion on Ways Catholic Higher Education Institutions Can Assist Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools

William P. Leahy, S.J.
President, Boston College
Joseph M. McShane, S.J.
President, Fordham University

As part of the third Catholic Higher Education Collaborative Conference (CHEC), an event cosponsored by Boston College and Fordham University, the host university presidents, Rev. William P. Leahy, S.J., and Rev. Joseph M. McShane, S.J., addressed conference attendees and discussed ways higher education institutions can assist Catholic elementary and secondary schools. This article contains a transcript of their remarks. Fr. Leahy, the 25th president of Boston College, has a keen interest in Catholic schools, understanding their importance for the nation and for handing on the Catholic tradition to the next generation. Through his efforts, the Center for Catholic Education at Boston College, now the Roche Center for Catholic Education, was established. Fr. McShane, the 32nd president of Fordham University, shares a strong commitment to Catholic education. He has become one of the most powerful voices in New York City speaking on behalf of the need for Catholic schools. The work of Fordham's Graduate School of Education and Center for Catholic School Leadership with Catholic schools throughout the metropolitan region has received support from Fr. McShane.

Father Leahy: I would like to make a preliminary comment before we focus on the question of how the various components of the Catholic educational enterprise can assist one another, particularly how Catholic colleges and universities can help Catholic grade schools and high schools. My prenote is that we cannot expect Catholic institutions of higher education to handle *all* the issues around personnel, curriculum, funding, and facilities, and absolve the larger Church community of its responsibility to strengthen Catholic elementary and secondary schools. Boston College cannot and will not run the Catholic parochial schools in the Archdiocese of Boston because that is not our mission. While Catholic colleges and universities can and should help Catholic elementary and secondary schools, they should not be seen as entities that can

meet all needs and respond to all requests.

But there are things that we can do and are doing.

Critical to any collaboration is an assessment of needs and capacities, and that applies both to the Catholic colleges and universities and to Catholic elementary and secondary schools. I think we have to be honest with one another, not overpromising and certainly not underdelivering once a promise has been made. In my experience, most Catholic college and university leaders are willing to offer expertise and assistance to parochial schools, but there has to be a willingness on the part of the diocese or archdiocese to involve them. There is still a level of suspicion in some quarters about Catholic institutions of higher education that they are not orthodox, or that somehow they are not really part of the Catholic community.

We can help with strategic planning and with fundraising, but it is important to acknowledge at the outset that the Catholic community has not always invested sufficiently and wisely in Catholic education. In too many instances, we have been running off our past educational reputation. Potential donors increasingly have to be convinced that a gift to a Catholic school will be worthwhile. Those who have given money over the years see a number of Catholic grade schools closing. So they ask, is their support a good use of resources?

I also think we can do a better job at planning the scope and timing of assistance, especially if there are a number of Catholic colleges in a metropolitan area. Curriculum workshops and coaching of teachers can be done, but needs scheduling. Someone has to take the initiative to deliver teachers to these workshops. Catholic colleges and universities have the expertise to provide programs on language arts, math, and sciences, and to acquaint teachers about new curriculum developments and models of instruction.

We all know there is a huge need for the next generation of principals in Catholic elementary and secondary schools. We do have teachers today in our Catholic schools who could be very effective principals. We first have to identify them, encourage them to think about becoming leaders at the assistant principal and principal level, and then help them with the education and mentoring that will allow them to assume leadership roles. I was talking with the head of school at a local Catholic elementary school recently, asking him about his faculty. He has roughly 20 teachers and has just been there 3 months, yet in that time he has seen leadership potential in his faculty. He said, "I have my eye on three teachers that I think could become principals." We at the Catholic colleges and universities can create training programs for these future leaders. There would have to be some

tuition assistance from the diocesan or archdiocesan office, and I think the individual getting the degree should invest as well. All involved should have a stake in mentoring and leadership development programs.

In addition, I think we overlook in many instances the willingness of our students, faculty, and alumni to volunteer their talent and services for Catholic schools. It is possible to have MBA students supervised by a faculty member to review the financial operations of schools, devise needed systems, and help standardize financial reporting mechanisms. Alumni could also do facilities assessments and help develop long-term plans for the physical plants of our grade schools and high schools. I believe there are numerous retired nurse alumni from Catholic colleges and universities who would be willing to serve as volunteer nurses 1 or 2 days a week in our grade schools. Finally, I think graduates of our schools of social work could help families in our grade schools that need assistance with immigration status or just coping with American life.

These are numerous practical ways in which Catholic higher education institutions can assist Catholic elementary and secondary schools. We should also remind ourselves of the importance of Catholic education and why all members of the Catholic community should be involved in supporting Catholic schools. We are all part of the Catholic culture, Catholic life; whatever we can do to assist schools at any level redounds to the good of all of us in the Catholic community and to wider society. It is part of our mission and the mission of the Church to evangelize and improve the quality of life not only in the United States but throughout the world.

We also must take on the question of why we do not have more Catholic grade schools in suburban communities. We have pastors who are not keen on being involved with grade schools. We also have a Catholic community that says unless the schools are really great, we are not going to send our children. I am convinced the Catholics will support quality elementary and secondary schools. It is interesting—the Jewish community here in Newton, Massachusetts, has been starting new day schools and expanding the ones that it currently has. A member of the Jewish community said to me, “Isn’t it ironic? You Catholics are giving up your parochial school system, and we Jews are starting ours.” They are doing that because it is a way of handing on faith, of sustaining a culture.

No doubt, we have a lot to do, but these challenges can be met with vision, hard work, and the grace of God.

Father McShane: Where Fr. Leahy ended is really where I am going to be speaking; I am not going to be talking about practicalities. I am really going to be talking about more fundamental things. As we all know the Catholic school system, or more precisely the Catholic schools systems, in the United States face tremendous challenges at this time. Among the challenges that they face include the following: declining number of religious women and men to staff them; increased cost of attendance; a seemingly lessening commitment to the schools on the part of the Catholic community, parishes, and bishops; nostalgia for what was remembered as the “golden age” for Catholic education; the suburbanization of the Catholic American life, which is one of the great triumphs and one of the great crosses of the American Church; increased competition that our schools face in the suburbs; and the acceleration of secularization in the American life. Now, faced with all of these challenges—faced with these challenges and all the ones that you know, lesser souls retire from the field and declare that the American Church has outgrown its need for the schools, the schools that have been such a distinguishing feature of the Catholic American life. One of the bragging points of the American Church is that there is no national church outside the United States that has had such an extraordinarily large and effective system of schools. In other places you have academies for boys or girls run by churches and congregations. But here in the United States, it is a unique system, or series of systems, and it is one that we should be proud of. In spite of the challenges, you are convinced that the schools are worth preserving. I admire you for that, and I share your sense of conviction. I take heart from the fact that this conference is taking place, as I am sure someone this morning has told you, on the 27th of September, which is the anniversary of the papal approval of the Society of Jesus by Pope Paul III in 1540. So it is, I think, a fitting day for us to gather. Why? The fact that we are gathered on this anniversary date reminds us that a small group with focused energy and a vision—a vision of service to the Church—can make a difference, can change worlds. Filled with that sense of optimism that comes from the anniversary—and I am told it is also the 350th anniversary of the Birth to Eternal Life of St. Vincent de Paul—let me address a few points.

First is the need to convince the Catholic community of their support of the schools into the future. Now, you may think that this is a largely marginal topic, or tangential one, given that you intend to talk over the course of this day about, to your minds, more pressing things. I would contend that unless we are able to rally the Catholic community—and this is what Fr. Leahy was just saying—to support the schools, all the high-flown plans that we have drawn up

will be for naught. Second, in order to rally the support of the Church around the schools, we have to address the primary challenge: articulating quite clearly a compelling vision for Catholic education, a vision that will both set Catholic schools apart from all others, both public and private, and invite people to invest in them, and to invest quite heavily in them. I am going to suggest some items that I think are important to this vision: First, you have got to be distinctive; and second, you have got to convince people to invest, and you have to say that this is not a cost that you are paying this year—this is an investment for life. We used to be able to do that. There was an assumption that sending a child to a Catholic school was not just this year's expense; it was an investment for life. We have to do that again. Third, on the basis of the shared vision that we articulate, we have to convince all segments of the Catholic family to create or to renew a community of shared concern devoted to the survival and renewal of American Catholic education. Finally, we have to embrace the need to think globally, as we look at what the schools can be in the future, but act locally when it comes to nurturing the communities of concern that will, in turn, nurture the schools. Now, I know that sounds very 1960s, but in point of fact, I think that is the way we have to proceed, with a general vision—a global vision—which is compellingly beautiful, and that is shared nationally, but then locally you have to listen to the local community.

Now, with your permission, I would like to address the four points in brief. I want to begin with the second point: articulating of a vision. In light of the fact that our schools exist and must survive in a very competitive environment—and I know all of you experience that, I know Fr. Leahy and I experience that—we have to be savvy. It is essential that we wrestle with the question of what makes or what can make Catholic schools attractive to families and students. I would suggest the following characteristics, which would have to figure prominently in the vision statement or in the mission statement that should guide the schools: first, creating and sustaining of a student-centered, nurturing environment in which students are cherished and challenged at the same time. Because we are faith-based schools, I think it would be essential for us—and the only honest thing for us to do—to trace the impetus behind the creation of such an environment back to the Gospel. Second is an honored and unwavering commitment to academic excellence. This is essential for all of our schools, whether they are in the inner city, in the suburbs, or in the most affluent areas of our cities, suburbs, towns, and villages. After all, no family is going to invest in Catholic education unless the schools will be able to prepare their students, their sons and daughters, for success in life. It is, therefore,

important that we make it clear that our schools do not insult their sons and daughters with low expectations. That is true no matter where you are. It is one of the great things about the Nativity Miguel and Cristo Rey schools. It is part of their mantra: We will not insult you with low expectations. The same can be said for the schools in the most affluent suburbs. Why would I send my child to this Catholic school in Newton, Massachusetts? Because we are not going to insult them with low expectations. We are going to push them. Excellence has got to be there.

Third is a deep commitment to values education. This is also essential. If we do not have a value-added dimension to the education that we offer, there is once again very little reason for families to invest in sending their children to our schools. Again, it would be important to trace the impetus for our commitment to values education back to the Gospel, where we really get our guidance and our inspiration. It is the impetus for all that we do. Of course, what I have not said is that I believe that we should be quite up front about claiming that our schools are devoted to character development. Now, I have gone from values education to character development. These are, I think, two things that are linked, and I think that they really do set us apart from all other schools, public and private. There is a sense that you are investing in something that is going to form character; you are investing in something that is, therefore, going to set your son or daughter on a good road for life and for life everlasting. I really do not hesitate to say that. It is an important part of who we are. Finally, we must include an unstinting devotion to faith education. This devotion, of course, is alluded to in all the other characteristics that I have just outlined. We have to be quite clear about the fact that we believe that our schools have a transcendent dimension that makes them worthy of support. It is not just a transactional dimension: Pay your money, get an education. There is a transcendent dimension. It would be easy and nice to say that this transcendent dimension is the foundation, but that is not what it is. It is both the foundation and the spirit that suffuses everything. That is something that we have to be up front about.

The second point I wanted to make is the case for the schools. If schools are marked by commitments to personal care, excellence and rigor in the classroom, values in education, and formation in both faith and character, I think that they will be what we want them to be: schools of distinction that are worthy of support, indeed, enthusiastic support. That is, of course, easy for me to say. But let me be honest and admit that it may not be easy to rally all the segments of the Catholic community to embrace the cause of the schools

at this point in our history. Why? There are lots of reasons why. You have 90 grammar schools in the Archdiocese of Boston. New York has 220 schools, educating over 115,000 students per year. The Archdiocese of Brooklyn, up until 2 years ago, had 46,000 students. Together they would probably be the seventh largest school district in the United States. But let us be honest, bishops have other things to worry about. There is competition for the attention of the bishop. Without broad support, the schools will fail. Therefore, what can and should be done to convince the entire community to support the schools? Quite bluntly, we have to engage in a sophisticated and sustained public relations campaign. It is as simple as that. We call it capital campaigns in admissions work and in higher education but it is public relations. The campaign has to be about convincing bishops, pastors, parish councils, families, and students that the schools are governed by the vision that I referred to a little while ago and guided by the characteristics contained in that vision that are investments that last a lifetime, indeed, that last more than a lifetime if they transmit the faith. We have to sell the schools as a new evangelization. In the process, we have to make it clear that the schools will prepare students for success in life, and prepare them with the faith that will enable them both to make sense of life, in the light of transcendent beliefs, and to live lives filled with purpose. It is a daunting task, but one that I believe we have to give ourselves over to. If we do not, the schools will fail. If the schools fail—and this goes to Fr. Leahy's point—the Church will be immeasurably impoverished. If you want to see what the American Catholic Church will look like without the schools, which prepare and have prepared generations of faith-filled leaders of the Church—and I say this as a historian and with objectivity—look at mainstream Protestantism. These are churches that are crying out for life and looking for ways to bring generations along in the faith. I think we have to learn from them, from their sense of loss and poverty.

If we are able to sell the schools, we can and will create communities of concern that will enable the schools to survive. Now, who would the members of these communities of concern be? Well, the usual suspects: pastors, parish councils, lay leaders, religious communities, but, most importantly, you must have the families. These are the communities of concern. There are two different kinds of communities of concern. One is institutional—bishops, chanceries, religious communities—and the second is the neighborhood. I am not talking nostalgically here, although when I grew up my life was completely defined by my neighborhood, which was completely defined and dominated by the parish, which had the Church and the school, the convent, the brothers'

house, and the rectory—and my parents. That is the way my parents felt—that they, at one and the same time, were part of it. They listened to it, but they owned it, too. Ownership is a big thing here. Tantalizingly, we cannot just cultivate the institution or the neighborhood. We have to do them both, and we have to cultivate them both at the same time. We have to convince both the institutional and the familial neighborhood communities that their futures depend on the schools. Therefore, we return to the need for public relations.

Moreover, these campaigns have to be bilingual, but not in the sense that you think. Rather, to the Church, the institutional community, we have to speak in terms of religious faith and point to the need to use the schools to ensure the faith will survive. To the neighborhood communities we have to speak of the more worldly value of the schools, as instruments that will enable children to succeed in life, to make it up the ladder, to achieve the American dream. Let us be honest, this is what American Catholicism has always been about in the work of its schools—two things at once: preserving the faith and making it possible for children to succeed. The Church never shied away from connecting the two. I do not shy away from it either. I sell Fordham by basically saying to prospective students and their parents: Come here! And what will happen? You will be prepared for life. These are the alumni that prove that we prepare people for life, and for success in life. And, you'll also be bothered for life by the sense that there is injustice in the world, and that there are things that you do not know. We have always put the two together. If we can make the case that the schools will serve the self-interest of these communities, then the communities of concern will grow up, if they—and they will—in turn, take responsibility. Ownership is big; responsibility is big. But you have to convince people it is worth it.

The last thing is thinking globally and acting locally. Here, I take a page from history. The schools have to be responsive to the needs and interests of the communities they serve. If you look back at our history, this was one of the things that was terrific about the Church. The Church pursued a centripetal strategy: It sought to bring all the ethnic communities together by pursuing a centrifugal local strategy. That is to say, if you had a German parish, you did not bring in Irish nuns. You brought in German nuns. You listened to the needs of the local community, you catered to the needs of the local community, and what did you do? You bonded the local community more deeply to the Church. Over time the Church was one. As we go forward, the same is true into the future. We must have a general vision of what Catholic education is all about, but we have to recognize that you cannot have a cookie-cutter pattern.

American Catholic education in the inner city is going to look very different in the South Bronx than it is going to look in El Paso, Texas. It is going to look very different in downtown St. Louis than it does in Southie (South Boston). That is not bad, as long as the basic vision and characteristics are present in all the schools: student-centered care, nurturing environment, rigor and excellence, values education, and the transcendent devotion to the faith. That is what made our schools successful: that they have been neighborhood schools owned by the neighborhood and because they listened to the neighborhood. That is the way my life was structured when I was a kid. I am sure many of you had the same structure. The ownership is important.

You will notice that I did not mention anything about the biggest problem, namely money. You will think that I am a coward for not addressing that problem. Well, I am and I am not. The American Catholic Church has always lived by the seat of its pants. It has always addressed challenges as they have arisen, and it has always been able—and Fr. Leahy was hinting at this—to convince the people in the pews that the work of the Church, because it was work that was done in response to need, was not only worthy of support, it really spoke to their hearts, and money came. I think that if we are smart enough we will be able to move forward. Also, I have to say, as a Jesuit on this Jesuit anniversary, I really do remind myself regularly that by any sane notion or measure the Society of Jesus should have gone out of existence shortly after it was founded. What saved us was the fact that our founder was visionary, given over to discernment; and, therefore, he was committed to reading the signs of the times and responding appropriately. That is, I think, what the Church is always called to do, and what the American Church has done remarkably well. The American Catholic Church has been successful precisely because it has been able to change; it has been able to answer new challenges. Right now I think what we have to do is use our assets—sometimes sell them—so that the central mission, preserving the faith and making it possible for kids to succeed in the schools, continues.