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Theme: Urban Catholic Education: Meeting the Needs of ALL Learners

The Church and Urban Education: Creating a New Missionary Project

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Introduction

It is an honor to offer a few comments at the start of this summit on Urban Catholic Education.

If we look at the people attending this conference, on campus and virtually, we would find little wrong with Catholic urban education. Participating in this Summit are some of the most innovative minds and creative practitioners in Catholic urban education. But in the opening remarks I would like to point to larger ecclesial questions facing our Church and some ways we might address these question during this conference.

We are all familiar with the opening of Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* --

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,

I believe this is a good statement of my feelings and perhaps yours, about Catholic urban education.

As the Fr. Ferree Professor of Social Justice, I spent much of my time investigating, teaching students, and organizing the community of greater Dayton to address the problems and challenges of advancing justice in the city. When I speak of the "city" I am talking about the metropolitan region – the center city and the suburbs. One of my focus areas is urban education both public and Catholic, in particular how does the structure of our metropolitan areas affect the opportunities for learning for children in high poverty neighborhoods. Using this perspective I will point out some troublesome trends in our cities and how the Catholic Church is responding to these trends. I will start with a short reflection on the "worst of times" -- what I have been calling the *disappearance of the Catholic evangelizing presence in the center city*.

But today is not just for realizing the urgency of the crisis that we are facing, but more importantly a day for building our hope for the future of urban Catholic education – so I also briefly want to explore the "best of times" for Catholic urban education. The title of this Summit is *Urban Catholic Education: Meeting the Needs of ALL Learners*. When you heard the phrase "Needs of ALL Learners" – who comes to mind – our students, our teachers, our parents, our leaders, our pastors, or our education commissions. All of these learners are important – but in my remarks I want you to keep one other important learner in mind – "What does our Catholic Church need to learn in order to create a vital evangelizing and educational presence in the center cities?" In the 2nd part of these brief remarks I will share a few partially developed answers to these questions – What I call ***Creating a New Missionary Project***. Hopefully these remarks will stimulate some bold and creative thinking on our part.

Disappearance of the Catholic Evangelizing and Educational Presence in the Central Cities

To develop one perspective on the “worst of times” I would like to explore the consequences of two trends.

The first trend – the movement of many Catholic families to the suburbs and the consequent movement of resources to the suburbs

Since the late 1940’s to the present time, there has been a movement of more affluent people from the central city to the first and outer ring suburbs. The consequence of this movement has been the concentration of families and children in high poverty neighborhoods and overtime resultant deterioration of these neighborhoods – with growing crime and violence, with deterioration of housing and amenities like shopping, and deterioration of a culture for raising children. This movement by the more affluent to the suburbs has taken place for many reasons – some of them good reasons – search of better housing and amenities, search of better education for children, search to be with people who think and act like us.

Because our foremothers and forefathers in Catholic education have done such an excellent job in educating our Catholic population, Catholics have grown in affluence faster than any other religious group, except for members of the Jewish community. In every dioceses in which I have been able to obtain numbers on the migration of the Catholic community the data shows that Catholics have moved to the suburbs at a faster rate than the overall metro population.

The result and the natural consequence of this movement of more affluent Catholics to the suburbs has been the necessary reallocation of resources to the suburbs. This reallocation of resources is not just a Catholic phenomenon; it has happened in almost all Christian denominations.

As a consequence, we in the Catholic Church have not had a focus on the center city of our metropolitan areas. We did not intentionally turn away from the center city; it was the unintended consequence of focusing on the suburbs – moving resources to where the Catholics are.

The second trend is around the resource management during this time of movement of Catholics from the center city to the suburbs. In many cases we have used a resource management approach, what some people have labeled “every tub on its own bottom.” Hence in many cases people of the Catholic parishes and schools have been told “You are responsible for your own educational enterprise. If you can’t raise the resources to sustain the school then you must close the school.” All the responsibility is placed at the local level.

Yet in my judgment, when our Popes and the Bishops have been calling for a “new evangelization” we have constrained our thinking with an approach to resource allocation within the Church that is neither “new” nor “evangelizing”. This method of resource management is also a one-sided application of the principle of subsidiarity.

In my judgment, the two trends have serious implications for our ministry of urban education. These trends, if they continue, will lead to the *disappearance of the Catholic evangelizing and educational presence in the center city*. We seem to be content as a Church to say “Since most of the Catholics have moved to the suburbs we should therefore focus our efforts on that constituency.” Because we are stuck in our resource management process that worked in the past but is not fitted to the current urban realities, we don’t have any discretionary resources available for an evangelizing and educating presence in the center city. I realize this explanation is overly simplified, but I believe it is basically correct.

Some Fragments on the New Missionary Project

Now for the “best of times.” I have a deep intuition and conviction that we in the Church are positioned for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will help us create a New Missionary Project that will commit the Church to creating a new educational and evangelizing presence in the center cities of our metropolitan areas. The *new missionary project* is my shorthand for a new reality that I believe is emerging in the Church – there may be better names for this emerging reality.

We are fortunate to have some of the pioneers of this new missionary project here at the Summit. Dr. Mary McDonald from Memphis has shown that it can be done with the Jubilee Schools. Wichita has developed a “stewardship” model for urban Catholic education and Denver has developed Schools in Urban Neighborhoods (SUN) Program to support urban Catholic education. We have the pioneers – what we need now is a large group of 2nd generation pioneers who can replicated some of these exciting innovations throughout the Catholic Church in the United States.

As I indicated in the beginning I have only a few fragmentary answers to the question – “What does our Catholic community need to learn in order to create a vital evangelizing and educational presence in the center city?” Given the limitation of time, I will state these fragmentary answers as briefly and directly as I can.

I believe that some, but not all Catholic dioceses, will develop a strong evangelizing and educational presence in the center cities of our metropolitan areas. It will be a smaller presence but just as vital as our presence during the early 1960’s. Creating this new missionary project takes practical and religious imagination, courage, and willingness to sacrifice. Not every diocese will be up to the task. Let me outline some characteristics that the diocese will need to create the new missionary project.

The new missionary project will require leadership from the Bishop and the Superintendent of Catholic Schools. Without a vision for an urban Catholic evangelizing and educational presence in the center city and a thoughtful strategy for financing, the new missionary project will not get off the ground.

The new missionary project will require a new ecclesial vision for the Church – a commitment to what I call urban solidarity. In brief, urban solidarity requires that we organize the Church in our metropolitan communities so that we are working for the common of good of all the members of the Church and so that we can be a partner in advancing justice and reconciliation in our city. More needs to be said about urban solidarity – but I believe it can be a new way of looking at the Church in the City. Urban solidarity will require us to see the Church as more than a collection of parishes and clusters of parishes. We must begin to view the Church of the metropolitan region as a network of parishes and faith communities and ministerial and outreach services that is organized to realize a shared mission of evangelization and education in the metropolitan region.

The new missionary project will require our Church to develop new resource allocation models that match the vision of urban solidarity. There are many innovations in resource allocation and funding that are working. We must be courageous enough to implement them and this will required asking the Catholic community to do more.

The new missionary project and the ecclesial vision of urban solidarity will require extensive development of the lay vocation within the Church. Lay leaders from within our educational community and the larger Catholic community must be engaged in creating and implementing the vision of a new missionary project. From my experience in leadership this will require relentless and on-going conversations. In one of his early homilies, Pope Francis challenged the Church to overcome its strong clerical culture and find ways for us to empower lay leadership to bring new life to the Church through collegial leadership.

The new missionary project will require us to imagine new ways of educating children and families in neighborhoods that are poor and are mainly non-Catholic – people who don't know the Catholic culture. As some of our presenters will illustrate, we must learn to develop a culturally appropriate vision and culture for our schools – which centers on Jesus as teacher and Mary as mother. We must focus on character traits for our students that reinforce this vision and culture – such as living as people of the beatitudes and people who are peace builders in the midst of violence. We must focus on removing the barriers to learning and human development that come from living in a high poverty neighborhood. As one mother told me about high poverty neighborhoods “These are tough places to raise kids.” We must engage the families and the community partners in removing these barriers.

For the new missionary project to be successful we must provide our school leadership and our teachers opportunities to develop and enhance their skills to realize both a Catholic culture and academic excellence in a very difficult urban setting. This development must not only be professional – but it also must provide opportunities to develop spiritually and religiously. Some of our presenters will illustrate how this development can take place within the context of a community of learners within each urban school but also as a community of learners across several urban schools.

The new missionary project of urban Catholic education will provide an opportunity to engage the next generation of young Catholics. It will provide a very meaningful way to engage in the practice of their faith and in an enterprise that will bring greater justice to our cities. This new missionary project can help us reach a younger generation of Catholics.

More needs to be said about this new missionary project – but hopefully this will get us started.

Conclusion

So let me conclude where I started – it is the “worst of times” and “the best of times.”

There are some ominous trends that if they continue will have the Catholic church abandoning its educational and evangelizing presence in the central cities of our major metropolitan regions of our community in the next ten to twenty years.

Yet in my judgment we are also positioned for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will renew our commitment to urban Catholic education. If we can read the signs of the times with a deep trust in God's providence and with openness to the Holy Spirit then we, the Church, can create a new missionary project that will allow us to have a strong evangelizing and educational presence in our central cities. This will require to boldly face the difficult situation of urban Catholic education and at the same time to have the courage to continue the bold and creative thinking that will shape this new missionary project for the Catholic Church. Your participation in this Summit will give all of us an opportunity to continue this bold and creative thinking.

Thank you.