

**Canisius College Sesquicentennial Talk**  
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Thank you for that very kind introduction. I must tell you that when John Hurley called to invite me to speak with you this evening, I was both honored and flattered because it offered me a chance to return (however briefly) to my second favorite city in all the world, the city in which I spent my regency at Canisius High School (which is known in Jesuit circles merely as The High School) in the early '70's. After flattering me by asking to be a part of the College's Sesquicentennial celebrations, however, John lowered the boom and told me that he wanted me to speak with you about the future of Catholic higher education in the United States. That, my dear friends, is not an easy topic for me to discuss or on which to opine since I am a Church historian. Therefore, like all historians, I am fascinated with the past and tend to be a linear thinker who sees the human experience in terms of the three phases in which we live and see things: past, present and future. Therefore, I would like to begin by spending some time looking at the

history of Catholic higher education in the United States, discuss some of the challenges the enterprise faces in the present and then (and only then) hazard a few guesses as to what the future holds for the more than two hundred Catholic colleges in the United States.

With that in mind, I decided to call this talk: “Remembering The Future of American Catholic Higher Education.” I know that that sounds odd, paradoxical, or just Jesuitical. After all, it uses an exercise (namely remembering) normally associated with the past to deal with the future. Moreover, it seems to imply that there should be a dynamic relationship between past and future. That, I assure you, is by design. Don't worry, however. I am not going to try to convince you that we will see a return to the past or that we should work to bring about such a return. I will, however, argue that we can learn a few important strategic ways of thinking and acting from the past that will help us to understand how we can and should confront, engage and embrace the future. With all of this in mind, let us begin with a look at a little bit of local and national contextualization.

As for the national context, let me remind you that there are approximately 250 Catholic institutions of higher learning in the United States, of which approximately 200 are true college or universities. As for the local context, the Diocese of Buffalo has seven Catholic colleges and/or universities (eight if you include Christ the King Seminary), as well as two others that no longer identify themselves as Catholic:

Niagara University, founded by Vincentians to serve men in 1856; Saint Bonaventure University, founded by Italian Franciscans to serve men in 1858; Canisius College, founded by German Jesuits to serve men in 1870; D'Youville College, founded by French Canadian Grey Nuns in 1908 to serve women; Medaille College, founded by largely Irish American Josephites to serve women in 1937; Rosary Hill/Daemen College, founded by German Franciscan nuns to serve women in 1947; Hilbert College, founded by the Polish Franciscans of Saint Joseph to serve women in 1957; Trocaire College, founded by the largely Irish American Sisters of Mercy to serve women in 1958; and Villa Maria College, founded by Polish Felician Sisters to serve women in 1961. (I have included the names and nationalities of the founding religious

orders of the Buffalo colleges for a reason that will become clear shortly.) In spite of the great variety of options that these colleges and universities offer them, however, at the present time only 10 percent of American Catholic college students attend Catholic colleges. (I will return to this data point in a while.)

As for the past, looking backward, it is clear that American Catholic education has evolved over the years. At each step along the way, however, its evolution was driven by a consistent desire to preserve the faith, and an equally consistent willingness (or was it a need?) to respond to the felt needs of the people the Church wished to serve in order to do just that: preserve the faith. As they listened to their flocks (who wanted to preserve their faith, break the cycle of poverty that held them down, and find a measure of acceptance in American society), and took the cultural temperature of the country (which was critical of both Catholicism and the attachment that the immigrants had for their own languages and customs), the bishops adopted a defensive (and rather insular—even isolationist) strategy. Not to put too fine a point on it, they threw themselves into creating what amounted to nothing less than

a self-contained community that existed both within and alongside mainstream American life.

This required both ingenuity and a fair degree of flexibility because the American Catholic population was anything but monolithic. In fact, although the outside world may have thought that the Church was a unified entity, when viewed from inside, it was really a crazy-quilt of ethnic groups, all of whom may have shared the bishops' critical view of American culture, but who also were somewhat suspicious of other ethnic groups. Therefore, catering to a diverse immigrant membership that believed that "language saves faith", the bishops were forced to create a community of communities. The result was a national church that was both catholic (small c) and Catholic (capital c) at the same time. Their achievement was nothing if not pastorally sensitive and market savvy.

This successful strategy held, but only for a while. As the 19<sup>th</sup> Century wore on, a growing number of bishops began to see that assimilation was all but inevitable. Known in history as the

Americanizers, they believed that the value proposition for the American Catholic educational enterprise had to be amended. To be sure, they continued to believe that the schools and colleges had to continue to do all that they could to preserve and nurture the faith, and to protect the immigrants from cultural animosity. At the same time, however, as they listened to their people, they realized that the schools and colleges had to prepare the immigrants for full incorporation into American society so that they could become be **players** in the culture and the world that they and their children would inevitably inhabit as time went on. (Their thinking here was still missionary: they wanted their people to achieve secular excellence so that they could have an impact on the larger society. Therefore, in a very real way they saw **secular excellence** as an **apostolic good**. Therefore, their thinking was informed by a respectful and responsive two-directional dialogue with their own people and with American culture.) This new approach inevitably led to changes (some of them quite dramatic) for our colleges: for instance, they adopted more recognizably American curricula and changed from a European six-year model that combined high school and college studies under one roof to a

more sequenced American model of studies. Over time, they also submitted themselves to the processes of accreditation to gain recognition of the solidity of the education that they offered their students. Sadly, however, the sting of cultural prejudice remained in some quarters that pronounced the graduates of Catholic colleges unworthy of admission to more prestigious universities for advanced study. This, in turn, led to the establishment of new professional schools and programs at Catholic universities—to respond to the needs (both felt and expressed) of their people.

This model continued to reign in the American Church until the second half of the 20th Century. Throughout these early periods, we can see the development of a savvy fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants strategy that was developed to deal with an incredibly diverse immigrant population: listen to the people; hear their needs, wants and demands; and cater to them. We also see the beginnings of a still-recognizable consensus-blessed value proposition for Catholic education, (especially on the collegiate level): driven by the Gospel, Catholic schools offered their students a faith-and-values-based education that stressed character

formation in a context that both cherished and challenged them in equal measure and that pushed them to achieve a worldly excellence that would enable them to escape poverty and assume their rightful place as leaders in American society. It was (and I would submit still is) a compellingly attractive value proposition.

The third stage in the evolution of American Catholic higher education began with the suburbanization that followed World War II, a period during which the pace of assimilation accelerated. Following the war, suburbanization transformed both the nation and Catholic culture. Ethnic Americans left the central cities--where the Empire of Charity was rooted. Catholics, moreover, began to compete with and to surpass their counterparts in every sphere of American life. They had arrived. And they knew it. During the dizzying first phase of suburbanization, middle class American Catholics attempted to reproduce the patterns of religious life that they had known in the cities. That is to say, they built new parishes and founded schools (from the grammar school to the collegiate level) with a reckless and confident energy. As for staffing these new schools, they did not give it a second



thought. The explosion of vocations after World War II supplied enough teachers to cover both the cities and the suburbs.

The second phase of this period of accelerated assimilation, (and hence the fourth stage in the evolution of the system) however, proved to be somewhat disorienting. The comfortable and somewhat insulated religious world of American Catholicism changed dramatically in the 1960's. The election of the first Catholic president seemed to signal that the culture was finally ready to accept Catholics as real Americans--and not just as tests of the nation's commitment to pluralism. As a result, the sense of difference that had made the creation of a parallel universe necessary in the 19th and early 20th centuries began to lessen in the minds and hearts of American Catholics. (The shared sense of purpose in the face of cultural opposition that had sustained the schools and the compact upon which they were built seemed to disintegrate. With it went the sense of protective urgency that had rallied the faithful to support the schools for more than a century. In other words, the Catholic community began to question the need for the schools—from grammar schools to colleges.) Then, in 1964-65 the Second Vatican

Council came to a close. Almost immediately, the American Catholic community was forced to wrestle with a number of questions and challenges that it had never had to face before. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life dried up--almost overnight. As a result, the staffing of the schools and colleges became more expensive.

And so we come to the threshold of the future, the fifth stage in the evolution of American Catholic higher education. We live in an age that is far more daunting than anything the Church has faced in the past and that's really saying something. After all, ours is an age marked by a number of internal and external challenges and cultural shifts. Externally, the colleges are now faced for the first time with breathtaking seismic demographic shifts. The number of high school and college-age students has dropped significantly and will continue to drop for the foreseeable future. In addition, the populations and economies of the old cities and metropolitan areas have contracted, leading to migrations to those areas of the country in which new industries are coming to birth. This latter trend is challenging for all colleges and universities, but especially so for Catholic colleges and

universities. After all, if you look at a map, you will see that the Church's higher educational network remains centered in the urban centers of the Northeast and Midwest that were where the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic community was strongest (but where demographics have now turned against us). The network is not, however, adequately present in those areas in which the Catholic population is growing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: the South and the Southwest. Even in those areas where the Catholic higher educational network was historically strong, the feeder networks of Catholic high schools have diminished, leading to a real enrollment crisis for Catholic colleges and universities. Moreover, since vocations to the priesthood and religious life have all but dried up, the costs of running the colleges and universities have mushroomed—precisely at a time when public education has become far more affordable and hence more attractive than ever before. If this was not challenging enough, at the other end of the economic spectrum, after the Catholic community became more and more successful, there emerged a tendency on the part of Catholic families to “trade up” to the most

expensive and prestigious colleges and universities they could afford for their children.

Demographic changes are, however, not the only challenges that the Church and its colleges and universities are facing. On the cultural-religious front, the nation has become demonstrably more secular in its attitudes and values. The internet and social media have lessened the ties and undermined the shared values that held face-to-face neighborhood-parish communities of faith together in the past. The nearly complete disappearance of nuns has been accompanied by the rise of the Nones (who are now the largest religious group in America, a group that are by their own definition or self-identification “spiritual but not religious”.) In this brave new world, Catholics have shown a surprising willingness to walk away from the Church. (Former Catholics now form the third largest group in America, right behind Nones and Catholics). The sexual abuse scandals that have plagued the Church have lessened the credibility of the Church and its many ministries. Therefore, it is really not all that surprising that only 10 percent of Catholic college-age students attend Catholic colleges and universities.

In other words, we no longer have a community focused on the faith and united in a consensus about the importance of faith in human life. Therefore, we come to the central question: how can find our way forward? I honestly think that we can only move beyond the present challenges by Remembering Our Future. Therefore, I honestly think that the savvy and attentive inculturation that our forebears used (without using that term, of course) is the key to the future of the American Church and its colleges and universities. It means that like them, we have to be involved in a restless and respectful dialogue with the world we find ourselves in and the world that we wish to serve. It means that we must listen to what the world is seeking—and then return to the Gospel to see how it answers the world's needs and satisfies the world's hungers. We must then tell the world **in the world's own language** what we have discovered and what we bring to the table of life. (In other words, we have to humble and strong enough to be bi-lingual evangelists—which is what all missionaries have done in the history of the Church.)

Beginning from that point, we should look long, hard and humbly at the successful practical strategies of the past to learn how to be market responsive in our own time (which is another way of saying how to be apostolically effective in the present age and in the future). And what will such a survey of the past reveal? For starters, that our forebears listened to the needs, wants and demands of the people in front of them and tried to respond to them in the most practical and effective ways they could. (They served the people in front of them, not people whom they might have wanted to serve.) They also had a deep interest in and understanding of the culture with which their people were dealing. These two attitudes are key: they were humble enough to listen and savvy enough to realize that you could not serve people either with a one-size-fits-all approach or with formulas from the past. (For those who served the immigrants of the 19<sup>th</sup> century making their way in a foreign and hostile culture, they did not see American Catholic higher education as a way of recreating the European experience. They saw it as a way of bridging the gap between the two—for a time, and then providing the children of the immigrants with a sure avenue to full

incorporation into American society. Savvy. Hard-nosed. Practical.) Through it all, they developed the value proposition (more in action than in words) that has driven and informed all of our efforts up till now, the value proposition to which I referred a little while ago: rooted in and driven by the Gospel, Catholic colleges offer their students a faith-and-values-based education that stresses character formation in a context that both cherishes and challenges students in equal measure and that pushes them to achieve a secular excellence that will enable them to escape poverty and assume their rightful place in American society and to preach the Gospel in word and action as leaders in that society. Even if our colleges and universities proceed in this way, I would be less than honest if I didn't tell you that I think that there will be fewer Catholic colleges and universities in America in the future than there are right now. Those that remain will probably be hybrid institutions that are the result of savvy mergers, partnerships and collaborations.

All is not lost, however. In this challenging moment, part of the Catholic community has already re-discovered and recommitted itself to our colleges and universities—with striking results for the Church as a

whole. (On this point, as I should mention that a recent study commissioned by the Bishops' Conference discovered that the ten percent of all Catholic college students who attend Catholic colleges account for forty percent of the active members in their parishes, and donate seventy percent of the income of those parishes.) In their own lives, the "faithful tenth" have come to believe (as did their ancestors before them) that the schools have transcendent value--and a number of compelling value propositions attached to them. With regard to the first: some American Catholics have once again discovered that faith offers them that compelling system of meaning that alone makes sense of their lives because it connects them with transcendence -- with God. As a result, they have come to believe that this is a value so great that it has to be preserved. Therefore, they have come to value Catholic colleges so much that they are willing to pay the high price of sending their children to them. They have also discovered the value of (I hate to say it) the Catholic educational brand. What do I mean by that? Parents are willing to invest in Catholic colleges because they believe (rightly) that they will both stress the importance of developing a relationship with



God, and reinforce the values that they teach their children at home. They see them, therefore, as resources that they can use or rely on in the work of forming character--and of preparing their children for success in life. (When I say that, I am fully aware of the fact that I may seem to be suggesting that parents see a transactional value in our schools: invest in Catholic education and your child will be a success. There is certainly an element of that. But parents also see a different kind of success offered in a Catholic school: the success that is seen in a faith-grounded life well-lived, or a life lived with a sacred and noble purpose.)

Finally, in the context of our past and present, we can contemplate what the future might hold for Catholic education. Since we are at the end of a long slog, let me cast this final part of my all-too-long talk in the form of a series of theses that can serve as jumping-off points for conversations and discussions in the future.

**A. First Thesis:** the challenges that Catholic higher education has faced and overcome in the past one hundred and fifty years will pale in comparison to the challenges that it will face in the next fifty years.

1. Reason: the cost of maintaining the system will become more burdensome as the cost of providing students with the kind of personalized, labor-intensive educational experience that we offer rises. This will tax the will of the Catholic community as it has never been taxed before.

**B. Second Thesis:** Catholic higher education will survive and thrive only if the American Church displays the wisdom that it showed in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This thesis has several sub-theses:

1. **First Sub-Thesis:** American Catholic higher education will survive and thrive only if the Church is clear about and stresses the values that our schools offer to its people. That is to say, the schools will only thrive if the Church is successful in convincing its people that the faith has transcendent value in their lives. (On this point, I think it is essential that we enter into conversation with the 10 percent to whom I

alluded a few minutes ago. They will help us understand what works for them—and not just for us.)

**2. Second Sub-Thesis;** American Catholic higher education will thrive only if it is as responsive to the needs of the Church's people today as it was in the 19th and early 20th centuries. On this point, I must stress that if we want to be serious about meeting the challenge of secularism, we have to see secularism as one of the key signs of the times. We have to take it seriously and listen to those who live their lives by its insights and directives. (We also have to ask ourselves what God is telling us about our own faith and our conversations about that faith through this particular “sign of the times”. I know that that sounds odd, but –following the wisdom contained in *Gaudium et Spes*—we have to ask ourselves if we have lost the ability to translate the Gospel into compellingly attractive terms for the people of our time. Therefore, we can’t back away from what can be and probably will be a very difficult dialogue with the world. In this dialogue, we have to find common ground with secularists. To do so, however, we have to be hold our tongues and listen to what they have to say about the things that

help them make sense of their lives and of the world. Then, and only then can and should we return to the Gospel—as *Gaudium et Spes* exhorted us to do-- to see how it addresses and answers the deepest needs of the human heart in our time. Make no mistake about it. We have to be true dialogue partners. We have to listen with open, attentive and responsive hearts. We can't afford to pretend to listen to them while we just bide our time till they have stopped speaking so that we can respond to them with time-honored formulaic presentations of the faith. If Saint Paul had done that in Athens, where would we be? Responsiveness is just that: responsiveness. It is not a deaf smugness.)

**3. Third Sub-Thesis:** the American Catholic higher education will thrive only if the Church recognizes that it is a community of communities--and that the needs of the various communities that it is called to serve are different. (The American Church has historically been a good servant of its people precisely because throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, it recognized that the needs of the Irish were different from the needs and interests of the Italians, and that the needs of the Germans and Polish were different from those of either the

Italians or the Irish.) In the future, the Church will be called to recognize and cater to (and I use that word on purpose) the needs of Latino-Catholics, African Catholics, Caribbean Catholics, and Catholics of European heritage. (Connected with this, we must continue to use our brand to serve and improve the lives of those who live at the margins of American society. If the bishops of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had not had the courage and wisdom to do that for our forebears, we would still be one step away from where they were when they arrived in America.) In addition, since we are living in the age of the Nones who live in a digital-cyber age, the Church must take them especially seriously. It has to listen to them. It has to take the reasons for their disaffection seriously. (It cannot afford merely to observe them from afar and wring its hands.) It has to enter into dialogue with them as well as with the secularists. We have to find common ground by trying to understand what they mean when they say that they are “spiritual and not religious”. It has to learn to speak their language, a language that can give us a sense of the systems of knowing, learning, values and meaning with which and by which they live. We must seek common ground, and I

believe that common ground exists both in their sense of themselves as “spiritual people” and in their strong and manifest commitment to social justice. Let us walk with them on this common ground and seek to bring the light of the Gospel to their endeavors.

**C. Third Thesis:** American Catholic higher education will survive and thrive only if it is able to believe in, nurture and build community-based colleges in which ownership is shared by the community, the school faculty and the parents. (This is what made the schools successful and vibrant in the past. It is what will sustain them into the future.)

**D. Fourth Thesis:** We have to recognize, celebrate and capitalize on the fact that Grace builds on nature. You may, of course, wonder, what that means and what it has to do with the future of American Catholic higher education? My friends, it has everything to do with the future of our schools. It is the sneaky part of dealing with the future of Catholic colleges in America. It is only if we recognize that grace builds on nature that we will regain a foothold or retain the foothold that we already have in the hearts, minds and lives of middle-class, upper--middle-class and upper-class Catholics. What do I mean? Simply

this. In the pluralistic and competitive environment in which Catholics live, successful Catholics have a dazzling array of choices for their children. Therefore, (as our forebears came to understand) Catholic colleges have to be remarkably successful in both the religious and secular work that they do. If they are, they will be magnets for families who are looking for the brand that will make it possible for their children to be successful in life. And there, my friends, is where the colleges can become instruments of evangelization. Students will come in the door expecting one thing (namely, an entree to a successful professional life) and will discover something far richer: they will discover the faith, a treasure beyond all telling, a system of meaning that will enable them to make sense of their lives and that will bring them into contact not only with the wisdom of the past but with the Author of All Wisdom. The brand will bring them in; the success they seek will keep them in the seats; and the wisdom of love will make them whole.

**E. Fifth Thesis:** American Catholic higher education will thrive only if it is seen as a value that the Church's people will invest in.

Therefore, when you sell Canisius (or any other Catholic school) to prospective students, look them in the eye and say to them, “If you come here, I promise you that you will never be the same.” Tell them that if they go to your college, they will receive a life-changing, mind-expanding, heart-enriching Catholic education. Tease it out a bit and promise them that if they go to your college, you will treat each of them as the most important student ever to attend your college—and you will because of the Gospel that stands at the center of all you do. Then, raise the stakes and tell them that if they go to your college, you will teach them how to read critically, how to think analytically, how to write with style, grace, precision and persuasive power, how to speak with the eloquence of angels, how to wrestle with the mystery of God, how to perfect the art of the question, how to set their moral compasses --and all this so that they can live their lives as leaders with a sense of noble purpose. Then, when they arrive on campus, spend yourselves redeeming those promises.



For my part, I believe that the system is of such value that we have to renew the compact that our ancestors made to make sure that they survive. Therefore, I sell the brand in season and out of season--to make a place for faith at the American table--whether that table is the dinner table around which families gather each day or the table of American public opinion, for you see, I believe that, as John Robinson said when he sent the Puritans off to Massachusetts Bay, the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth out of His Holy Word--for the good of the nation, the Church and the world.

