

Remarks for Nativity/Miguel Schools Leadership Conference
“The Sacredness of Leadership for Mission”
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When Monsignor Jordan asked me to speak today on the sacredness of leadership for mission, I thought back to the time when I became Trinity’s president. I met the president of another Catholic women’s college who said, “Congratulations, you’ve just done wonders for your prayer life.”

Not being overly pious, I looked at her somewhat sheepishly and said, “Gosh, Dorothy, what do you mean?”

“Every day,” she said, “You’ll be walking all over campus exclaiming, “Oh, my God!” Dear Jesus!” (No blasphemy intended!)

I soon learned the truth of her wry comment. There are no atheists in the front offices of institutions like ours that do so much with very challenging students and remarkably scarce resources. We don’t do it for any kind of bottom-line profit; we do it for much greater rewards.

To talk about leadership at this juncture in American history is a particularly interesting task. Thanks to the 24/7 news cycle we see examples of different kinds of leadership at every moment of the day. We see Texas tough talk in the White House, and Chicago cool on the campaign trail; Alaskan rugged individualism, Arizona straight talk. We see white men in dark suits with furrowed brows talking about derivatives and credit swaps and bailouts; we see other men in baseball caps or football helmets driving their teams onward to the big games. We see occasional women --- the chic news anchor, the elegant House Speaker, the shrewd talk show celebrity. More rarely, we see leaders of color --- the young mayor, the clever entrepreneur, too often, the entertainer or athlete.

What we don’t see much of these days are people in leadership positions who really embody the idea of leadership as a sacred trust, a profound responsibility to organize and motivate an entire community to act with a common purpose, to achieve mutual goals, to live by shared values, to exemplify the commitment to the continuous creation of the Good Society not simply for good secular ends but as a matter of faith.

We who are gathered in this room today are the heirs of such leadership passed on to us from the remarkable educators who created the original models whose genetic codes we carry forward today. We are stewards of one of the greatest educational traditions the world has ever known -- the tradition of Catholic education forged in the 19th century by religious women and men whose great works flourished for immigrant populations through the 20th century. Through that powerful tradition, so many of today’s social, political, corporate and service leaders received exceptional educational advantages in schools, colleges and universities formed through

traditions we knew as Christian Brother, Sisters of St. Joseph, Jesuit, Mercy, Vincentian, Ursuline, Benedictine, Franciscan, Sisters of Notre Dame, and so many others.

But as we are all too aware, the diaspora of Catholic immigrant populations after the first several generations spread from the cities to suburbs to all places in our nation. By the late second, third and fourth generations, the children of this movement were well-received into good public schools and elite privates, and on into flagship public colleges universities and the most prestigious private institutions of higher education, the Ivy League. Meanwhile, the religious who once were the backbone of Catholic educational institutions declined precipitously, shrinking the pool of free labor (“contributed services”) that made the network of Catholic schools possible. White flight and rising salary expectations combined to squeeze urban parishes to the point of extinction --- first the schools, then the churches.

While Catholic parishes and schools continued to flourish in economically flush suburban locations, where the new wealth of Catholics could more than offset the costs of absent contributed services, the same could not be said for the urban parishes growing older, grayer, more impoverished each day.

Was there any point to continuing an educational ministry in neighborhoods gone hostile, changed beyond recognition, communities of Christians praying to a God that seemed so different from the fair-skinned blue-eyed Jesus we had come to venerate on our holy cards and Sunday missals?

Was the work of generations of faith-filled teachers and school leaders done? Did the out-migration of Catholic populations from urban neighborhoods and schools mean that this mission should no longer illuminate the heart of American cities?

We say yes to this mission! We are lighting the fires of mission anew among populations who were at risk of being abandoned. We who work in this rare and privileged vineyard today have located our professional lives in a place that is, at once, both hauntingly familiar and profoundly different from anything we have ever known. Our leadership challenge has been no less than to rediscover the DNA of our faith’s heritage in education and replant the idea of the sacred transformation of human life through learning in a vast new terrain, a landscape that is often strange and difficult. Along the way, we have had to create new vocabularies of values and commitments, rooted in the Catholic heritage of our predecessors but articulated in ways that can be heard by new communities of interest and need. “Dominus Vobiscum” meets “Whassup?”

On the surface, the differences in our work today look almost decoupled from the past tradition of this ministry: fewer “sister” and “father” and “brother” colleagues among us, many more “Ms.” and “Mr.” and “Dr.” --- lay faculty, administrators and leaders who have remarkably different backgrounds from the faculties and leaders of our heritage schools. I’m probably dating myself seriously when I suggest that the majority among us may not even know (or can’t remember!) how to decode the secret pattern of the clicker in the back of the church; or know how to listen for that soft rattle of rosary beads coming around the corner, warning loiterers at the water fountain to scurry back to class.

Catholic schools in the 19th and 20th centuries were a manifestation of the commitments of religious women and men, and Catholic families as well as the Church itself, to the formation of succeeding generations in both faith and intellectual advancement. And, clearly, our schools manifested the desire of Catholics to have the same skill sets as other citizens of this new nation so that we could participate in the economy of upward mobility and social acceptance. Catholic schools were hugely successful in this endeavor. I do not mean to be overly provocative in suggesting, however, that the idea of *justice* was not necessarily an overt part of our educational vocabulary in times past; although, in fairness, the idea of justice was clearly at least an unarticulated impulse and motivation that made good people do great things for no material reward save the spiritual satisfaction of knowing that their contributed services improved the lives of children and families across generations. They made it possible for Catholics to move from the margins of American society --- we once were among the most reviled of all minorities --- to the most powerful religious group within the mainstream of social, political and economic life in this country.

And now, we seek to do exactly the same thing for others at the margins of American society in the 21st Century. But so much is different. Our students are not necessarily Catholic, though most are Christian. They are predominantly not white; most are impoverished, and many come from homes where the idea of family is a broad notion, indeed. We, their teachers, may be called by different titles than in the past, and we may have vastly different professional and personal formation stories to tell. But we have come together on a common ground of articulating that idea of Gospel justice through education for the “least, the lost, the left out among us.”¹ We are the legacy of Elizabeth Seton and Katharine Drexel and Cornelia Connolly and John Carroll and Catherine McAuley and Julia McGroarty and so many other founders of the great Catholic educational institutions, now putting their luminous examples to use in new ways to light the lives of new immigrants into the mainstream of educational and economic opportunity.

But most of us probably did not start out with those examples in mind, and we probably find it startling, perhaps even off-putting, to think of what we do as the sacred trust of leadership for mission. We’re spend our days repairing roofs and refereeing staff disputes and trying to balance the budget while anxiously watching over the progress of our students to see if we really are making any difference in their learning outcomes. If we pray for anything, it’s probably a quick ferferino to keep the fire inspector away, make the auditors happy, get the lawyers out of our hair. We might even, perhaps uncharitably but in a heartfelt way, ask the Lord to leave all regulatory agencies behind.

Let me share a few personal perspectives.

I did not start out as Trinity’s president with any kind of vision thing going on, other than to try to help my college. In fact, at age 36, a public interest lawyer, I knew precious little about organizing or running any kind of business, let alone a college in the final stages of a long period of crisis. It’s good that I had no experience, because I didn’t know what to be afraid of.

¹ From the U.S. Bishops *Economic Justice for All*, 1986.

I remember asking one of the sisters on the board of trustees, when they interviewed me for this job, what I needed to know about dealing with the Church. She looked surprised, and told me that I should focus on getting the college fixed, and don't worry about the bishop. In fact, a few months later, I showed my total agnosticism about how to deal with bishops when, sitting at a lovely luncheon with several bishops at the table, I made the mistake of striking up a conversation with the bishop sitting next to me. Introducing myself as Trinity's new president, he asked me how it was going, and I regaled him with several stories about roofs and plumbing and budget nightmares. He looked bored. I then noted that I recognized him as one of the bishops involved with the then-young conversations about *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, and I said to him, "You know, bishop, it would be so terrific if the bishops would have some kind of program to help new presidents like me learn the theological concepts we're supposed to know in the leadership of Catholic colleges." He turned ashen, and looked at me long and hard over his rimless glasses. He then said, in a very thin, cold voice: "My dear, we *expect* our presidents to *know* theology!" and he turned away in utter disgust. I began to realize that I was something of an oddity: a leader of a Catholic educational institution who had not been educated in a seminary or convent. Yes, I was raised in Catholic schools, and had taken several courses in undergraduate Theology at Trinity; but my advanced training was, for goodness sakes, in Law (at Georgetown, no less!) --- I had a different pathway to the presidency from most Catholic college presidents.

This difference was only magnified on the several occasions when our local bishop invited the presidents of the three local Catholic colleges to dinner. I was the only woman and only lay person present. As the men with collars lapsed into seminary Latin, I sat primly in my best blue suit saying nothing for fear that I would betray, not my ignorance (I had studied Latin and could follow the conversation), but my anger at being treated like an outsider when I was trying to manage the most difficult and precarious institution of the three. But by that time, I had decided that I was not one bit worried about theology, frankly, but had a clear vision of the straight line between margin and mission. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* could not help me balance the budget, even with an improved prayer life. And, if I could not get the financial resources we needed to sustain Trinity, we would be unable to serve the students who needed us so very much, whose opportunities for educational and economic improvement depended upon Trinity's ability to thrive.

I began to develop a clear leadership philosophy that what mattered most was not how erudite I could be on the dialogue of faith and reason, but rather --- with the conviction of faith that this mission should be sustained --- what mattered most was how well I could craft solutions for an institution beset with many challenges, but clear about its unique mission in our world.

I received important and valuable direction on this question, time and again, from the Sisters of Notre Dame who had founded Trinity. I read our history over and over; I read the letters of the SNDs Founder St. Julie Billiart, full of pragmatic wisdom and plain-spoken direction with occasional bursts of inspiration. I learned that Julie was such a disruptive force for her bishop in Amiens, France that she had to flee to Belgium to continue her ministry in developing schools for poor girls. I learned that Trinity was controversial from the start, opposed by the right wing of the Church who thought it scandalous that Catholic women would go to college. I rather delighted in being part of this ongoing heresy in women's education.

I heard from many of our alumnae who deeply desired a restoration of the old Trinity, a place of fond memory with delightful traditions and strong intellectual and religious values. As we struggled to figure out whether there was a place in this world for a college like Trinity any more, a Sister of Notre Dame galvanized me and our board of trustees when, at one meeting during our early strategic planning process, she sat up and proclaimed across the board room: why are we trying so hard to “reclaim” a population that is lost to Trinity forever, the middle-and-upper-class Catholic women who now go in droves to Yale and Brown and Virginia? Why are we ignoring the population of women at Trinity’s doorstep, here in the District of Columbia, whose needs are so great? Aren’t these the women for whom St. Julie founded her congregation, for whom Trinity was founded to provide access to a higher education for women who did not have access to college? Today’s barriers are not policy but pragmatic --- is college really accessible for the single mother raising three kids on service wages? Is college really possible for young women who graduate from the DC Public Schools without math skills? Trinity’s mission challenge has been to learn how to say, “Yes!” to these great educational needs.

Trinity began to move in a new direction, embracing the women of Washington in a remarkable renewal of our mission as a women’s college. We did well by doing good.² As our student body grew again, the complexion of our students also changed; soon, we had a majority of African American and Latina women on campus, most from very low income backgrounds.³

And then, the trouble really began.

Sometime in the mid-1990’s, I remember attending a meeting of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities during which we had roundtable conversations about our institutions. After I described Trinity’s student body to my fellow presidents, a priest at the table turned to me and said, “That’s very interesting but can you tell me one thing: how can you still be Catholic with so many Black students on campus?”

This same question arose among our most ardent Catholic alumnae; after one presentation about our student body, an alumna commented, “We don’t mind the diversity, so long as it doesn’t ruin our Catholicism!”

More insidious things were said about our changing complexion: again, from the ardent Catholics, a charge that we had become a (said as an epithet) “community college.” Sadly, even now, some within the Catholic intellectual elite truly think that being a fine Catholic college or university means that service to large numbers of historically marginalized students, from a demographic not our own, is somehow a betrayal of our faith tradition.⁴

² Today Trinity’s women’s college is thriving, and we are a diversified university with three schools including coeducational units for working women and men; our enrollment this year is at an all-time high of 1,750.

³ Trinity’s student body today is about 70% African American and about 20% Latina.

⁴ One of the more egregious examples of this bias can be found in James Burtchael’s book *The Dying of the Light*, particularly his ill-conceived comments about the service that the College of New Rochelle extends to large numbers of adult students who attend part-time.

I spent a lot of time in the 1990's writing about mission and visiting alumnae chapters trying to get our graduates to understand that Trinity was not rejecting our glorious past, nor were we in a state of "loss" that so many seemed to be grieving, but rather, we were evolving to a new articulation of our mission in the modern world. I spoke about the vision of St. Julie and the mission and charism of the Sisters of Notre Dame. Some found this downright infuriating. When I was quoted in the *Washington Post* on the mission of the SNDs to educate the poor, an alumna called me up to say, "I was never poor!" On other occasions, when I suggested that women's colleges were founded because women were discriminated against in the 19th and early 20th centuries, I would get letters proclaiming, "I am NOT a victim of discrimination!"

Seems that a lot of Catholics skipped class on the days they taught about social justice.

What does all of this have to do with you, the leaders of the Nativity/Miguel network? These stories --- about the bishop who was scandalized by the thought that a person without theological training would head a Catholic educational institution, and the Catholics who see service to large numbers of Black students or poor students as not part of our affirmation of our faith --- these examples illuminate the leadership and stewardship challenges that all of us have in our work today as we make faith-filled educational opportunities happen for people on the margins of our society.

Are we being faithful to our religion if we now preach to a different choir?⁵

Can we speak the language of this ministry if we have not had formal training in its verbs and inflections?

What is the true measure of our effective stewardship of our ministry in faith-filled education?

Let's talk about that different choir, your students and mine, the entire focus of our ministry.

The great shame of this nation, the most well-educated and wealthiest in the history of civilization, is the scandalous way in which children are allowed to remain outside of the simple justice of a decent education --- in city after city, year after year, generation upon generation. The fact of slavery may well have been eradicated more than a century ago, but the effects of slavery are manifest each day in the poverty, violence and adult illiteracy that are rampant conditions in our cities. (Consider: 35% of adults in D.C. are functionally illiterate.) Where parents can't read, children won't learn. More than half a century after the Supreme Court of this nation said that racially segregated schools are inherently unequal, the tradition of de facto racial segregation, which goes hand-in-hand with economic impoverishment of neighborhoods, is alive and well in our urban schools and neighborhoods.

Are we being faithful to our faith when we call out this great sin of American culture? When we put our professional lives on the line to make it possible for at least some children to find their way out of this ongoing nightmare of diminished opportunities in abysmally failing public schools?

⁵ I have borrowed the "different choir" metaphor from Trinity Economics Professor Cristina Parsons who has written an excellent paper on the challenge of learning to teach Economics to Trinity's students.

As the saying goes these days.... You betcha!

If there is one value above all others that we must articulate in our work as educational leaders today, it is the value of equal educational opportunity as a fundamental right and necessity for the fulfillment of our obligations to honor human life and dignity, which is the foundation of Gospel justice.

This is the leadership that you are demonstrating so well in the Nativity/Miguel network.

Our sacred leadership for mission calls us to be clear and, as needed, even courageous on this point: the education of the poor, the marginalized, the predominantly non-Catholic Black and Hispanic children of this nation *is* an essential manifestation of our faith, *is* advocacy for human life and dignity, *is not* a departure from the “Catholic” education we once knew, but a vibrant continuation of that mission for new generations of the soon-to-be American majority. The children you educate today will be the first generation of leaders in this nation where a majority of citizens will be nonwhite.

So, to those who ask me, but how can you say you are doing the work of Catholic education with so many students who are not Catholic, I say, we are living the Gospel every single day. To paraphrase my friend John Carr over at the Bishops Conference, we’re Catholic schools not because our students are, but because *we* are Catholic.

Can those of us who are lay leaders do this ministry with as much fidelity to mission as the great religious people who blazed the trails before us?

Absolutely. Every time I read one of those dreadful commentaries about how the decline in vocations means that our Catholic institutions will no longer be Catholic, because the labor force will not be populated by sisters and brothers and fathers, I get incensed --- no pun intended!! I think the greatest tribute we can pay to the wonderful religious teachers and leaders who blazed the trails for us is to take up their work in new ways, for new populations of students, with new approaches to contemporary educational challenges.

We lay leaders owe it to that great heritage, however, to study it, respect it, and learn as much as we can about our religious and theological traditions. To be truly credible leaders for faith-centered schools, we have to know the faith, not in a Catechism way, but in a truly intellectual framework that will help us to inspire, inform and guide our colleagues to continue this mission with its values intact.

Finally, how do we fulfill our stewardship obligations?

There are days, to be sure, when just opening the front door and turning on the lights seems like a heroic act of stewardship. These may be some of those days. We are all somewhat suspended in this vat of molasses known as the credit crisis, the economic meltdown. The bailout is unlikely to trickle down any billions to us, but the failure of the bailout could do irreparable harm to our families, our donors, our missions.

Even with so much uncertainty in the external climate, our stewardship responsibilities call us to act in every prudent way possible to be sure that our schools are sustained through this terrible time. We have no idea how long or how deep this recession will last. What we do know is that we come from a tradition that achieves much with little, that somehow makes the loaves and fishes go a little bit farther each day. We've done it before, we can certainly do it now.

But simply surviving is inadequate. By accepting leadership positions, we are called to lift up our school communities each day. Our students, faculty and staff, parents and friends all look to us for assurance, for a sense of direction, for inspiration. The late John Gardner once wrote that "the first and last task of a leader is to keep hope alive."

Let us be beacons of hope each day for all whom we lead through the work of our schools.

Let us be joyful in our work, because there is no better way to use our talents than to improve the lives of our students.

Let us be courageous on behalf of our mission, and tireless in our advocacy for our students, because their success will run through the generations to come.

Let us be unapologetic in our conviction that we are doing the work of the Lord each day, advancing the cause of justice through education, lifting up the dignity and worth of our students and their families.

Let us rejoice that we have the privilege of this sacred trust in education.

And let us never hesitate to pray each day --- not only for a few extra dollars for that leaky roof and sketchy plumbing --- but more importantly for the renewal of our faith daily. Let us pray in the words of the Psalm (90, 14:17):

*Fill us at daybreak with your love,
 That all our days we may sing for joy.
 Make us glad as many days as you have humbled us,
 For as many years as we have seen trouble.
 Show your deeds to your servants,
 Your glory to their children.
 May the favor of the Lord our God be ours.
 Prosper the work of our hands!
 Prosper the work of our hands!*