



*Promoting the Pedagogy of Hope:
Remarks for the High School Principals Association
of the Archdiocese of Washington
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Over the course of the last few weeks in Washington, one question kept haunting me: what are our students learning from all of this ugly behavior among elected officials, and even uglier stuff among the countless vitriolic voices setting the internet on fire with hatred?

For my students at Trinity, who are some of the most marginalized people in the capital city, the lessons were, unfortunately, more distrust, more alienation, more fear and despair. Many of our students are federal workers or dependent on federal jobs, or employed in the lower paying jobs that work in services supporting federal workers, from the food trucks to housekeepers to aides in child care centers. They suffered the shutdown with no money in the bank and bills to pay, food to buy, kids to feed, rent checks to write. We did what we could to help them with their material needs --- deferring tuition payments, providing Metro farecards, even creating our own food pantry to help their families. But the larger problem remains of obtuse, inhumane, cruel and selfish behaviors by public officials who should be helping, not hurting, the people they are sworn to serve.

And what about you, our Catholic teachers and principals who work with students younger than mine, who are more impressionable in their formative years? What were your students learning from the spectacle of irresponsible behavior in the public arena? I'm sure some were directly affected, like my students, and probably many more simply found the entire situation incomprehensible. Aren't the adults supposed to be setting the good example of peaceful conflict resolution, respectful dialogue and creative problem-solving?

Catholic education faces huge challenges today on so many fronts. Even as we try to figure out how to evangelize this increasingly fractious society, we face many threats to our own mission persistence. In the elementary and secondary schools, sustaining affordable models with access and excellence is a daunting task --- as it is in Catholic higher education as well. Effectively engaging with the resources and tools of the public sector without bargaining away our distinctive mission is a very difficult pathway to navigate.

I spent last weekend at a conference at the University of Scranton with the Lilly Fellows, an ecumenical organization devoted to strengthening church-related institutions and building faculty for our colleges and universities of many denominations. We all talked about the threat

of overwhelming federal regulation that imposes a “one size fits all” straightjacket on our special mission in faith-based education. The proposed new federal rating system for colleges, just like the private U.S. News ranking system, has absolutely no metrics for value-centered, faith-infused education because, quite frankly, our values often defy quantification.

If we can't measure it, does that mean it's worthless? Of course not! But how do we prove our worth in an era that believes that anything worth learning must be assessed on a bubble sheet? The great crises of our age require knowledge and skills, values and commitments that defy the cryptically small circles of #2 pencils.

Rather than feeling beleaguered, however, I think this historic moment affords Catholic education at all levels a great opportunity to step up our game, to reaffirm mission in an age that needs our values desperately, as well as the model of educational excellence that has been the hallmark of Catholic education for two centuries.

We should proclaim our pedagogy of hope that gives life to our work each day. We are often the brightest hope for students who see too much cynicism and not enough charity in their daily lives.

We must be the exemplars of peace and reconciliation in a time of ugly fractious public discourse and too much violence of language, thought and action.

We are called to be the best teachers to lead our students to shape a vision for the future of that Good Society we so desperately seek, teaching them how to be advocates for action that is deeply rooted in the Gospel imperative for social justice, a Catholic ideal shared across great faiths.

Let me share some of how we do this at Trinity. Catholic social justice values are embedded across our curriculum from Sociology courses on Inequality to Bioethics to Nursing engagement with healthcare for the poor to Green Business to a Chemistry research project on pollution in Ivy City to the emphasis on developing spirituality and moral reasoning that pervades our required courses in Religious Studies and Philosophy. Our co-curricular programs include numerous opportunities for students to engage with service to communities of need, and Campus Ministry turns out to be the most popular of all student activities.

We have recently launched the [Billiard Center for Social Justice](#), named for St. Julie Billiard who founded the Sisters of Notre Dame in 1804 with a distinctive mission in education to poor girls orphaned in the French Revolution. The Billiard Center has already hosted significant lectures on poverty in America, peacemaking and environmental justice. Sisters Camilla Burns, Mary Johnson and Mary Ellen Dow who collaborated on founding the Billiard Center have all told me that the most astonishing experience for them thus far has been the outpouring of faculty interest in working with the initiatives of the Center --- lectures and colloquia, action projects and service learning. Faculty engagement, renewal and continuing education are clearly key to ensuring the vitality of mission, which is also your purpose here today.

I am sure that each of you, in your own schools, can present myriad examples of these kinds of projects engaging social justice. How do these initiatives connect to the formation of students who will be citizen leaders responsible for engaging the thorniest issues of human society in the decades to come?

We need to be especially mindful of this stark fact: by the year 2050, if not before, our nation will no longer have a white majority. Already, births of babies of color have surpassed white births. Why is this significant? In a nation that still too often finds justice elusive for people of color, in an age when racism remains ever prevalent and talk of immigration reform often triggers an outpouring of hatred, we all must have grave concern for the ability of the next several generations to find their way through to peaceful, productive communities amid great diversity. (Coincidentally, in yesterday's mail I received the latest copy of *MOMENTUM* magazine from the National Catholic Education Association and I was so pleased to see this issue is devoted to the topic of "Developing Intercultural Competencies.")

We must teach our students the ethic of caring for other human beings as a moral imperative. The ethic of care must not be a political football; it belongs to no political party but should pervade all political decisions and social actions. It is a profound moral responsibility that should be one of the major outcomes of a Catholic education.

There's so much disrespect, indeed, contempt for human persons in our secular discourse and public life today. Shutting down the federal government was utterly contemptuous of the rights of workers and human needs that depend on government service. Absolutely hideous anonymous comments now grace many news stories online. Twitter goes wild with the most despicable rants when various topics arise --- whether something like a discussion of the name of Washington's football team or reactions to a speech by the president of the United States or a story about the Catholic Church --- thousands of toxic, unrepeatable comments flood cyberspace, a window on the very sick soul of contemporary popular culture. Guns proliferate; grace retreats.

How do we teach within and against this toxic tide? Do we have the strength and conviction to dare to be countercultural, to show our students a different way to engage the remarkable opportunities and immense difficulties of contemporary culture? "Stand your ground" should not be a call to arms, but rather, an imperative to confront violence, to respond to crisis moments with the courage of civility, charity and forgiveness.

We all know that the bedrock of the social justice teachings is the protection of human life and respect for the dignity of the human person. Too often, the chaotic secular political discourse and cacophonous media universe reduce this teaching to simplistic labels and misleading questions: "pro-life" is a term appropriated by politicians to win votes of a certain stripe, or coined in sound bytes to communicate complicated ideas in 15 seconds or less. Are you on one side or the other? There are no "sides" when it comes to upholding the dignity of human life, only our profound moral obligation to do so in each encounter with all God's children.

We must teach our students the fullness of what it means to be truly pro-life, not as a political posture but as the means to create a truly just society where all human beings receive the respect and protection they deserve.

Think about this fact: more than 30% of children in the District of Columbia, the capital of the richest nation in all of human history, live with chronic hunger, one of the worst food insecurity rates in the nation. This in a town where very well-fed Congresspeople cast votes to eliminate food stamps. More than half of D.C.'s children live in families at or below the poverty line. While having some of the worst academic achievement rates in the nation, D.C.'s children suffer the sorry distinction of being well above the national average on hunger and poverty.

“Poverty” is perhaps the most unfashionable word of all in political discourse these days. But the social justice imperative to take the “option for the poor” must be part of our pedagogy of hope, an essential thread in our tapestry of human dignity. The gap between rich and poor in this nation and around the world grows wider each day, and the incalculable toll of human misery and despair pours into the gap like thunderous great falls. We Catholics don’t really have the option to look away from the edge, to back up to a place of safety. We certainly cannot abide a public posture that blames people for living in poverty, that calls them “takers,” that refuses to help the least among us. Our faith teachings require us to rush to the precipice, to reach out to help those who are falling away to the caverns where hope’s light cannot reach.

At Trinity, we’ve taken this to heart in the very design of our university today --- beyond doing good works and teaching our students about service, we have embraced the “option for the poor” in the population we serve today. More than half of our students come from the District of Columbia, most from the impoverished neighborhoods along the eastern edge of the city. We educate more D.C. residents than any private university in the nation. We are the only university with a degree program east of the river, at THEARC in Ward 8. Our student body today is more than 90% Black and Hispanic. Our median family income is just \$25,000, and more than 60% of our D.C. students score “0” on the “expected family income” test for federal financial aid. 70% receive Pell Grants.

We have chosen to serve these students --- mostly women, many young single mothers living by their wits and street smarts, but with precious few other resources --- we have chosen to serve them with the inspiration of the mission of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Trinity’s founding congregation, who make action for social justice their central concern.

We hear the call of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the Vatican Document on Catholic Higher Education: “Every Catholic University feels responsible to contribute concretely to the progress of the society within which it works: for example it will be capable of searching for ways to make university education accessible to all those who are able to benefit from it, especially the poor or members of minority groups who customarily have been deprived of it. ...” (Paragraph 33)¹

How did Trinity get to this place? It’s a long story, but allow a brief synopsis for today: We were founded in 1897 by the SNDs because, at that time, women were barred from admission

¹ Pope John Paul II, [Ex Corde Ecclesiae, Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities](#)

to the then-new Catholic University --- “an embarrassment” in the words of no less than the great Cardinal Gibbons who was a co-conspirator with the nuns in Trinity’s founding. Despite some considerable opposition from right-wingers who considered a college education for Catholic women a heresy (Americanism), the nuns prevailed (as they often do!). And for the first 80 years of Trinity’s life, we educated largely middle-and-upper-middle class young women from the east coast Catholic enclaves. Many forces conspired to blow up Trinity’s whole operating basis in the 1970’s and 1980’s ---- probably some forces familiar to this audience, like the loss of contributed services as the number of sisters declined, and forces unique to higher education like the rise of big time college sports, NCAA and Title IX.

By the time I became Trinity’s president in 1989, full-time daytime enrollment was less than 300. We engaged in strategic planning and had a lot of debates about what to do, with some voices urging full coeducation. Fortunately, the Sisters of Notre Dame, while increasingly few in number on the faculty and staff, still had moral authority and presence on our board. “Why are we trying so hard to reclaim the past,” declared one such nun at a board meeting, “when there are thousands of women at Trinity’s doorstep who could profit from this education? We founded Trinity to make higher education accessible to women, and countless women still find barriers to achievement. Trinity should be open to them.”

Those words were a clarion call to engage the paradigm shift which is ongoing. Today we take our mission to marginalized women very seriously, and we also have men from similar circumstances in our adult evening and weekend programs. We are pleased to partner with other schools and programs that share this mission ---- particularly with the Cristo Rey Network, the Washington Middle School for Girls and other Catholic schools, charter schools like the KIPP schools, and public schools as well. We are working on a partnership to fund scholarships for Dreamers, because we believe that immigrant young people deserve a great higher education regardless of whatever papers they possess, or not.

We have some great success stories. One of our recent graduates, Sandra Villegas, Class of 2013, spoke a few weeks ago at the College Success Foundation breakfast and she exemplifies the urgent need to expand access for historically marginalized people:

“I was born and raised in Washington, D.C. but... my mother migrated to the United States from El Salvador in 1989. My mom never went to school nor does she know how to read or write. She is a single mother of four children, and I am the oldest....She works 8 hours a day cleaning bathrooms and office buildings...As a Latina, standards were set very low for me. Many stereotypes were used against me such as getting married or starting a family early, not graduating from high school, and never going to college. However, I did not let that stop me.”

After graduating from Bell Multicultural High School --- the first in her family to finish high school, Sandra enrolled at Trinity. “I was skeptical about applying to this college since I felt a little uncomfortable about it being a women’s college. But I thought about how empowering it would be for women coming together for the same purposes of higher education, giving back to the community, and social justice. Trinity was the best choice I ever made.”

At Trinity she took advantage of every opportunity, earning a prestigious Sister Seton Cunneen Fellowship to spend a summer working at Martha's Table, going on the Campus Ministry Alternative Spring Break to Selma, Alabama to work with BlackBelt Housing, and interning in other community service organizations. Sandra did so well that she finished in four years, has no student loan debt, and is now a graduate student at Catholic University. She has her sights firmly fixed on her responsibility to work for social transformation: "I want to inspire others to better themselves academically and to do what is right for society, by contributing their time. ...I will continue to be engaged in supporting college access, particularly to low-income and first-generation students...I hope one day – when I am employed full-time- to provide financial support to other young people, who, like myself, are able to change the path of their family and their community by demonstrating the importance of education in their lives."

We need to make more opportunities open to the Sandras of this world. Every Catholic school, true to its own history and tradition, called to the urgent needs of today's city and society, needs to make education for social justice a central part of the curriculum, to make access a real priority. We must teach our students that issues like the right to life, rights of workers, relief of poverty, solidarity with those in need and environmental stewardship are not crazy extremist political positions but, in fact, central commitments of our faith.

We, ourselves, must not be afraid of the social justice teachings of the Gospel. Sadly, on some days it seems like too many adult Catholics might have skipped class when social justice was on the lesson plan. You may well have some families and parents in your school communities who believe that talk of human rights, poverty, environmental concerns, justice and peace exposes a left-wing godless plot. We need to be somewhat fearless in taking on the challenge of evangelizing families and communities. We will never change the public discourse if we remain silent. Silence fails our responsibility to educate our students in the fullness of our faith.

We need to take a page from the fearlessness of Pope Francis. He said many interesting and important things in his recent interview in America magazine, but this particular passage seems most appropriate for our reflection today:

*"How are we treating the people of God? I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church's ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel. The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. ..."*²

We are those ministers of whom the pope spoke --- the teachers, the administrators, the school leaders, the merciful guides who warm the hearts of students, who engage the constant dialogue of teaching and learning while leading our students through ever steeper terrains toward the light and hope of truth. We light the way with our pedagogy of hope, confident in our mission to teach our students to be leaders for justice and bearers of peace for the generations they will serve in the decades ahead. May the Lord's peace go with you!

² Pope Francis I, interview in America, by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., [A Big Heart Open to God](#), September 30, 2013.