



# Anthony Ruggiero Lecture Series



This annual lecture is held in memory of **Anthony J. Ruggiero**, a faculty member in the Education department of what was then Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales, and to honor the legacy of **St. Leonie de Sales Aviat** (1844-1914) and the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales ([link](#)). The series enlists experts who address contemporary topics in the world of Catholic education (elementary, secondary, or post-secondary). The copyrighted text that follows is provided for personal enrichment and is not intended as a commercial or professional publication.

**REV. JOHN PODSIADLO, S.J.**

## ***BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY THROUGH EDUCATION***

*13 September 2004*

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### **Introduction** (Rev. Thomas F. Dailey, OSFS – Director, Salesian Center for Faith & Culture)

Good evening and welcome to the third annual St. Leonie de Sales Aviat Lecture on Catholic Education. This lecture series honors the life and work of Mother Aviat, the foundress of the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales and a champion for the evangelization of young ladies.

You'll find on your seats a little postcard depicting Mother Aviat with one of her stock phrases: "Let us work for the happiness of others." That she did, to a heroic degree. In particular, she worked to bring happiness to young girls who had come to work in the textile mills in Troyes (France). She founded a religious order -- our "cousins," the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales -- who brought happiness to the girls through the education they provided them.

Tonight we will hear about a relatively new educational venture that not only works toward the happiness of young people but also aims to equip them with an education that will enable them to rise above poverty. The Nativity Schools are a network of middle schools (grades 6-8) begun by the Jesuits in New York City. I'm proud to tell you that we, the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, recently opened one of these schools -- Nativity Prep in Wilmington (DE). Tonight we're happy to have the entire faculty and staff of that school join us for this lecture.

The director of the Nativity Network has extensive experience with this model. Having served for 23 years at the helm of the original Nativity School in Manhattan, he now leads the network of similar schools throughout the country from his office in Baltimore (MD).

To tell you all about how these schools operate, and what tremendous good they do for young people, I'm happy to present to you the 2004 Aviat Lecturer in Catholic Education ... **Fr. Jack Podsiadlo, S.J.**

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## **LECTURE**

I am grateful to DeSales University and the Salesian Center for Faith and Culture for the invitation to deliver the Aviat Lecture on Catholic Education and to share with you, benefactors, educators, future teachers and other invited guests the work I have been engaged in now for 31 years. When Tom Fr. Tom Dailey first contacted me in May, I had no idea who Leonie Aviat was. So it was to the internet I headed and was delighted to find out how much of a kindred spirit she was. From her first visit to the glass factory in Sezanne and her desire to take her place among the working young women, guiding and counseling them, through her joining in Fr. Brisson's Oeuvre Saint-Francois de Sales and bringing to the working girls an holistic education – human and Christian, through her founding the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales and the establishment of schools throughout France, Italy, South Africa and South America, she manifested the same zeal and commitment to the poor, enthusiasm and entrepreneurial spirit that characterize so many of the leaders of our Nativity and Miguel schools today. Were she alive today, I'm sure that she would be, in one way or another, connected with our schools. And so it's an honor for me to celebrate her and her life's mission through this lecture.

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### **Breaking the cycle of poverty**

Since the early 70's, there has been a topic much talked about in Catholic circles – sometimes positively, sometimes pejoratively,; Preferential Option for the Poor. It was integral to the Theology of Liberation that developed in Latin America in the 70's and 80's but was reigned in during the 90's until it's hardly ever spoken of today. Yet the reality of poverty is all around us and growing. In the media we hear more and more about the ever growing gap between the rich and the poor, both globally and at home.

Just last month the Census Bureau released critical data regarding the number of persons in the US who are poor and who are lacking health insurance. The bottom 20% of households received 3.4% of the nation's total income in 2003 – the lowest

share on record. The richest 20% received about half of household income (49.8%). Furthermore, the number of poor children has grown by over a million from 2000 to 2003. There are nearly one million children living below half the poverty line since 2000 – that’s less than about \$7,500. for a three-person family.

The schools I am talking about tonight make a preferential option for educating these children based on the belief – which some say is naïve – that education will be their way out of poverty.

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### **Context: Catholic education in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to present**

I graduated from St. Stanislaus Kostka Elementary School 50 years ago this past June. The Sisters of St. Joseph taught all grades. 98% of the students were of Polish descent. My parents paid no tuition; just the Sunday envelop. The strong academic and religious formation we received was the first rung on the upward ladder of success. Almost every one of my classmates went on to a Catholic High School. Very few went to college; most sought employment at Eastman Kodak where they thought their future was secure. Four of us entered religious life. Many of you had a very similar experience, I’m sure. I wish I knew the exact figures, but I imagine that there must have been well over 12,000 Catholic schools at that time. St. Stanislaus School closed its doors in 1990. When did your Catholic alma mater close?

According to the NCEA, last year, in 2004, there were 7,955 Catholic schools: 6,727 elementary; 1,228 secondary. Interestingly, 34 new schools opened while 123 consolidated or closed. I know that of the 34, 7 belonged to the Nativity, LAMS, or Cristo Rey Networks. This month, 9 new schools opened among the three networks.

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### **Chart of history of Jesuit Education**

Believe it or not, Jesuit Education in the USA has had its biggest growth during the last 14 years because of the Nativity middle schools and the Cristo Rey high schools. This graph, created by James J. Fleming, S. J., professor of education at Boston College, indicates that in 1990, there were 75 educational apostolates sponsored by the American Jesuits (twenty-eight post-secondary, forty-six secondary and one Nativity school). Last year there were 90 educational apostolates sponsored by the American Jesuits (twenty-eight post-secondary, forty-five secondary, fifteen Nativity and four Cristo Rey) -- an increase of 17 educational apostolates in fifteen years.

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**Sept. 13, 2004**

During the 1950's and 60's, Nativity Mission Center was a multi-service agency staffed by Jesuits along with religious and lay colleagues addressing the needs of Puerto Rican immigrants, especially children and teens, on the Lower East side of Manhattan. In 1971, the staff decided to establish a middle school built on the successful elements of the youth center while adding a rigorous academic program that would prepare these first generation New Yorkers for acceptance into the Jesuit and other Catholic high schools of New York City.

From the very beginning, the middle school included an extended day of enrichment and athletic activities plus a supervised evening study center. Each summer the boys spent seven weeks away from the negative forces of the streets in a summer program located in Lake Placid, NY. As the first graduates were ready to move on to, financial aid was raised to enable them to attend Catholic high schools. All were welcome d back in the evening for study hall and tutoring. Nativity became their second family. Some went on to college while others joined the military. Years later they would return to where they felt they most belonged, and Nativity's doors were always open for them.

Since 1989, this Nativity model has been replicated in cities across the country. The Jesuits in Boston said, "If they can do it in NY we can do it in Boston." The first schools were Jesuit sponsored and for boys, but that didn't last long.

Soon the women religious were saying, "If the Jesuits can do it for the boys, we can do it for the girls." In 1993 Mother Caroline opened in Boston, Holy Child in NY. Religious communities found these schools to be a way of returning to their roots – to the original inspiration of their founders – to bring education to the poor.

Also in 1993, Brother Lawrence Goyette, FSC, established a school for poor boys in Providence, RI and named it after the just canonized, Brother Miguel, an Christian Brother educator in Ecuador. This was the first of the San Miguel Schools of the Lasallian Association of Miguel Schools.

In other cities, religious and laity saw that this model of educating the poor might work but realized that on community couldn't do it alone. And so, collaborative sponsorship began to develop. Mother Seton Academy in Baltimore: 6 congregations of women and men; Sisters Academy in Asbury Park, NJ: 2 congregations of women; The Washington Middle School for Girls is a collaborative effort of the Religious of Jesus and Mary, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, and the National Association of Negro Women.

A volunteer teacher at Nativity Prep Boston during its early years belonged to the Episcopal Church. Why couldn't his Church sponsor a Nativity school? Was this movement restricted only to Roman Catholics? Epiphany School opened in 1997 and

presently there are feasibility studies to open three more Episcopal sponsored schools. In addition there are 5 schools without a specific church affiliation, sponsored by an independent board of Trustees.

There are five key players in this educational option for the poor

- Nativity Network (42Schools) Including the Nativity School of Wilmington, DL whose teachers are with us this evening.
- LAMS (15 schools)
- Foundation for Nativity and Miguel Schools

The Foundation was established just last summer to be a fundraising partner for the two networks, soliciting funding for joint collaborative projects such as the annual Principals' Institute, the upcoming Development Directors Institute and other projects designed to bring programming and funding to the local schools. I am very pleased to announce tonight, publicly for the first time, that the new executive director of the Foundation, beginning in October, will be Msgr. John Jordan, presently Director of Institutional Ministry and Advancement of the National Catholic Educational Association and a priest of the Diocese of Scranton.

- Cassin Educational Initiatives Foundation

The Cassin Foundation was established in 2000 by Mr. B. J. Cassin, to facilitate the replication of Nativity, Miguel and Cristo Rey schools by providing money for feasibility studies as well as three year start-up funds.

- The Cristo Rey Network is a national association of high schools that provide quality, Catholic, college preparatory education to young people from low-income families who otherwise could not afford such an opportunity. Member schools have their own identity but are characterized by a curriculum that is tailored to the students' needs and by the unique Corporate Internship Program developed in 1996 by Cristo Rey Jesuit High School of Chicago through which each student finances the majority of the cost of his or her education. The high school contracts with leading corporations, industries, institutions of the area for entry-level jobs. Four students rotate during the week working 9 – 5. The income goes to subsidize their tuition. The Cassin Foundation, in collaboration with the Gates Foundation, provide feasibility grants as well as start-up monies.
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## **The Body/Soul of the Nativity Model**

In their book, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom claim that the racial gap in school achievement is the nation's most critical civil rights issue and an educational crisis. A typical African-American high school graduate really has only an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. In most subjects, the majority of twelfth-grade African-American students do not have even a "partial mastery" of the skills and knowledge that the authoritative National Assessment of Educational Progress calls "fundamental for proficient work" at their grade level. The book's message, however, is one of hope: Scattered across the country are excellent schools getting terrific results with high-need students. These rare schools share a distinctive vision of what great schooling looks like and are free of many of the constraints that compromise education in traditional public schools. Although the Thernstroms focus on charter schools, they could be describing Nativity and Miguel schools. I would now like to discuss the unique characteristics you see and feel when you visit one of our schools, the characteristics which make them successful.

### ***Essentially middle schools***

- The crucial years

### ***For underserved families***

- We arrived at this terminology after much discussion and consultation.
- At-risk is too negative and broad. **Why not at-promise?**
- Low-income families is more objective.
- Qualify for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program. About 94%.
- Do not take students from Catholic schools unless recommended by the principal for financial reasons.

### ***Small Classes***

- 12 to 15 students per class.
- No school population over 100.

### ***Not tuition driven***

- Families contribute something: monthly fee and/or service hours.
- Fundraising is an essential element of the school: President and Development Director
- Best Practice: An individual sponsor to cover the "cost-per-student" for each student every year.
- Vouchers where applicable.

### ***Extended Day***

- Doors open at 7:00 or 7:30 and don't close until dinner-time or later.
- Two or three meals plus snacks are served each day.
- Time for cleaning the school.
- Time for art, drama, music, athletics.
- Time for tutoring and supervised homework.

### ***Extended Year***

- If they're not moving forward, they regress. No such thing as standing still over the summer.
- Kinds of summer programs depend on resources and creativity of individual schools:
  - Residential programs off site.
  - Utilizing facilities at a local high school or college.
  - A combination of on-site and off-campus at a retreat center or camp.
  - Enrolling students in programs sponsored by other agencies.
  - Year-round schooling.

### ***Graduate Support Program***

- The character unique to our program.
- Purpose: to accompany the students through the most difficult years of high school.
- Orientation to high school begins in 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade. It is expected that all will graduate from high school and go on to post-secondary education.
- Finding the best high school fit for each student.
- Securing financial aid for students enrolled in private schools.
- Mentoring progress through high school and intervening when necessary.
- Tutoring program involving volunteers.
- Advocating for student at high school
- Preparing students for SAT and ACT exams.
- Facilitating the college search and application process.
- Maintaining relations with alumni.

### ***Values found in Nativity schools (the soul of the program)***

- What you feel when visiting one of our schools.
- Who we are and what we stand for

### ***Mission Driven***

Each school's mission statement is unique, yet all will include: middle schools, committed to excellence, that educate, support and nurture with love children from

low-income families to reach their full potential in service to God and to humanity, preparing them for success in high school and beyond.

- The Mission Statement is clearly displayed for all to see.
- The Board and staff are involved in Mission Effectiveness.
- The President/Director/ Head is the “Keeper of the Mission”.
- All staff are hired in keeping with the mission.
- Orientation to Mission is essential for all new staff members.

### ***Faith based***

- All people are created in the image of a loving Creator.
- Every child is sacred.
- “God talk” is welcome and encouraged.
- Charisms of sponsoring religious congregations are explained and promoted.
- Liturgical celebrations are essential.

### ***Quality***

- High expectations for all students and teachers
- All are encouraged to reach for the stars.
- No one is tracked.

### ***Collaborative Partnerships***

- Among sponsoring congregations.
- With other local schools for sharing facilities and staff.
- With local service agencies for specialized skills and personnel.
- With other Nativity school and the Nativity Network office.

### ***Educating the whole child***

- An holistic approach to the student: addressing the academic, social, emotional, physical, artistic and spiritual development of each child.
- Recognizing and respecting the multiple needs of children

### ***Personalism***

- Smallness facilitates knowing everyone in the school.
- Getting to know the child and family from the application process through the Graduate Support Program.
- Sensitive to the local population and its racial, ethnic and economic issues.
- Tapping into the strengths of the urban child.
- Respecting the humanity of the people served.

### ***Family Involvement***

- Not entitlement but collaboration, partnership with the family.
- Family interviews during the application process.
- Required hours of service.
- Formation programs for family/caregivers.
- Families participate in fund raising events, public relations, recruitment, accreditation and evaluation.
- Family input into high school and college choices.

### ***Focus on Service***

- The Goal: formation of men and women for others.
- Service projects are part of the curriculum.
- Leadership skills are developed through the program.
- Opportunity for outside volunteer involvement.

### ***Entrepreneurial***

The leadership must be continually creating new ways to stay alive:

- Funding
  - Student sponsors
  - Annual giving
  - Foundations and Corporations
  - Events.
- Staffing
  - Intern teachers (Americorps)
  - Retired teachers
  - Volunteers
- Collaborating
  - Sponsoring organizations
  - Local schools and agencies.
- Programming
  - Sharing “Best Practices”

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### **Data**

- **Total # of schools (04-05)**      57
  - NN = 42
  - LAMS = 15
  - Co-ed = 27 (including schools with single gender classes)

- Boys = 21
- Girls = 09
  
- **Current Students (03 – 04)**
  - African-American = 49%
  - Latino = 37%
  - Caucasian = 6%
  - Asian = 2%
  - Other = 6%
  
- **Average Attendance Rate = 97%**
  
- **Graduates – Total Number of Graduates Served (03 – 04) = 1219**
- High School
  - Eighth Grade Class of 2003 = 397
    - 259 attending Catholic High Schools 65%
    - 46 attending Magnet/Charter Schools 12%
    - 40 attending Public High Schools 10%
    - 26 attending Independent, non-Catholic Schools 7%
    - 17 attending boarding Schools 4%
    - 8 attending Technical/Vocational Schools 2%
    - 1 other (moved out of the USA)
- Post Secondary
  - Eighth Grade Class of 1999 who graduated from high school in 2003
    - 182 out of 209 = 87%
    - 4 earned GED
    - 7 still in school
    - 193 or 209 = 92%
  - What are they doing after high school?

▪ 56 Public 4 yr College/University	31%
▪ 32 Community College	18%
▪ 31 Private 4 yr College/University	17%
▪ 25 Catholic 4 yr College/University	14%
▪ 25 Working	14%
▪ 8 Trade/Vocational training	04%
▪ 2 Military	01%
▪ 3 Other (moved out of USA)	01%

**America's Untapped Resource** ( cf. Richard D. Kahlenberg, editor America's Untapped Resource: Low-Income Students in Higher Education.

- The American ideal of a meritocracy, where one can advance as far as talent permits, remains a cherished national goal.

- In the US, a single characteristic – access to and success in higher education – turns out to have enormous implications for one’s economic prospects in life. College in America is a great prize, nothing short of a gateway to the American dream.
- Within two years of graduating from high school, two-thirds from the wealthiest quartile enter a four-year college, compared to one-fifth from the poorest quartile. Nearly three-quarters of students enrolled at the most selective 146 colleges are from the top economic quartile, compared with just 3 percent from the bottom economic quartile.
- Thus, at a time when inequality appears to be on the increase again, the fundamental question remains of great importance: What must we do to make higher education more available to those who face special barriers to entrance and graduation? Unless we effectively answer that question, the dream of a true meritocracy will remain unfulfilled.

The Nativity, Miguel and Cristo Rey schools are striving to make that dream possible for their students.

### **Pell Grants as indicators of Enrollment of Students from Low-Income Families**

In the book, *America’s Untapped Resource: Low-Income Students in Higher Education*, Donald Heller, senior research associate at the Center for the Study of High Education at Penn State looks at Pell Grant recipients as an indicator of enrollment of Low-income students at “Most Competitive” and “Highly Competitive” colleges and universities.

“The tables that follow provide the undergraduate enrollment, number of Pell Grant recipients, and proportion of undergraduates receiving Pell Grants for the 2001 – 2002 academic year. They supply this information for Barron’s “most competitive” and “highly competitive” institutions. The “most competitive” institutions on average had 10% of their undergraduates awarded Pell Grants, while 16% of students in the “highly competitive” institutions were recipients. Public institutions, with an average Pell Grant enrollment of 19% of undergraduates, had a higher proportion than did their private counterparts, at 13%. Pp 157 – 159: *America’s Untapped Resource: Low-Income Students in Higher Education*, Richard d. Kahlenberg, editor.

By no means are our schools 100% successful. Tragedies affect the lives of so many of our students. An article appearing in the San José Mercury News this past June just before the graduation of the first class of boys from Sacred Heart Nativity School, concluded by stating:

“Of the original 20 students, seven left. Some proved to be special-education students, whom the Sacred Heart faculty was unqualified to help. Some decided the school's rules were too severe. And one ended up in the headlines. James Ortega now resides in a Santa Clara County juvenile detention facility. He is accused of slaying two youths in January at an East San Jose fast-food restaurant. At 14, he is the youngest person ever to face homicide charges in the county's adult criminal court. James had lasted only eight weeks at Sacred Heart. He is remembered as a troubled but respectful youth who left after a period of heavy peer pressure from gang members outside the school. Fr. Peter Pabst, president of Sacred Heart Nativity School winces at the memory. "I always hate to see a kid leave," he said. "When James left . . . well, I didn't start a school to have kids leave."

These are the very adult choices our students have to make at a very young age. We give praise and thanks for those who choose the Nativity way. We pray God's blessing and protection on those who choose another road.

Thank you.

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