



# 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. 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.

**DR. JOHN J. CONVEY**

## ***CATHOLIC IDENTITY: The Value-Added and Essential Component of Catholic Education***

*11 September 2006*

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I am honored to be here this evening to present the annual Anthony Ruggiero Lecture on Catholic Education.

This day, September 11, holds poignant memories for us. I'm sure each of us during the past several days has experienced many reminders of that terrible attack on our country five years ago and, on this anniversary, have prayed for the victims and their families, for our country and for peace in the world. That fateful day in 2001 is one that will be forever burned in our memories.

Another date also has special significance for me this evening. Sixty years ago, in September 1946, I began my journey in Catholic education when I entered the first grade at Holy Child School in the Logan area of North Philadelphia. In our neighborhood, it was taken for granted that if you were Catholic you went to Catholic school. Holy Child School had a strong sense of Catholic identity. All the students

were Catholic; all the teachers were Sisters of St. Joseph; and the parish priests were very visible in the school. One of the priests, ordained just a few months earlier, was Father Thomas J. Welsh. Being newly ordained Father Welsh was very popular with the students in the school. One vivid memory that I still have is that as a young child while on vacation with my family seeing Father Welsh with his family riding on the Ferris wheel at the Jersey shore. Many of you here this evening also know Father Welsh. He would later become an auxiliary bishop in Philadelphia, the founding bishop of the Diocese of Arlington, the diocesan bishop here in Diocese of Allentown from 1983 to 1997, and now its retired bishop.

Except for my graduate studies in summers at the Ohio State University and for three years at Florida State University, I have been involved with Catholic schools as a student, teacher or researcher ever since that September day in 1946. For the last 24 years I have had the privilege to help dioceses around the country with strategic planning for their Catholic schools. Working with so many dedicated individuals over the years has deepened my appreciation of the value and contributions of Catholic schools, and the importance of their Catholic identity. So, when Father Dailey invited me to give this lecture, I quickly decided upon the topic: Catholic Identity: The Value-Added and Essential Component of Catholic Education.

Each adjective in the title, value added and essential, speaks to an important reality. Catholic identity is a value-added attribute of a Catholic school that is not found in other types of schools. It is the attribute that provides a Catholic school with its edge. Catholic identity is also an essential attribute of a Catholic school because if it is not present, how can a school really be Catholic?

My talk this evening is divided into three parts. In Part I, I describe a model of Catholic identity for elementary and secondary schools. In Part II, I speak briefly about Catholic identity in Catholic colleges and universities. Finally, in Part III, I present a few findings from a national study on Catholic elementary schools released

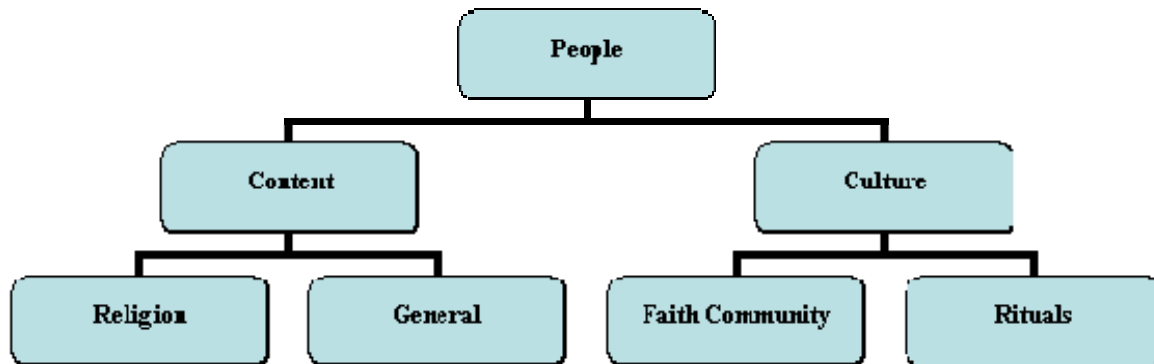
just a few months ago that speaks to some of the issues that face Catholic schools today.

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Some years ago during one of the planning studies that I was conducting, I was asked during a meeting, “What do you mean by Catholic identity?” I was taken aback a bit, not by the question itself, but rather by the identity of the questioner, a prominent pastor with responsibility for a Catholic school. Perhaps he asked the question to test me or to elicit a response that would help to educate others at the meeting. Whatever the reason, I realized then and there that I had better define my terms, as a good researcher should always do. I had assumed for years that the concept of Catholic identity was so ingrained in those involved with Catholic schools that I could freely use the term and it would be clear what I meant. The pastor’s question prompted me to be more proactive in explaining what I mean, and what the Church means, when it refers to Catholic identity.

I decided that a visual representation would be helpful to explain Catholic identity, so I developed the following model. The model provides a schematic representation of the various ways in which a Catholic school creates and sustains its Catholic identity. At the top of the model are the people who communicate the message (content) and create the environment (culture) that comprise the essence of a Catholic school. The message (content) is centered in the religion program, but also is integrated widely in the rest of the curriculum in appropriate ways. The environment (culture) of a Catholic school reflects and supports its Catholic identity through the establishment of a faith community, an emphasis on service, the celebration of rituals (prayer, liturgy, sacraments) and the presence of appropriate symbols by which a school is recognizable as Catholic.

**Figure 1: Model for Catholic Identity**



People are at the top of the model because they are the creators and drivers of the school's Catholic identity. The shared responsibility to ensure that a vibrant Catholic identity exists in the school varies according to the role that the person has in the school. Before I elaborate on the roles that individuals play in developing and fostering the school's Catholic identity, I want to spend a few minutes discussing a key part of the model, which is that aspect of the school's culture that is referred to as the faith community. To do this I will turn to the literature on effective schools and to the documents of the Church.

### **Effective Schools**

The literature has identified organizational factors that regularly are found in effective schools. These factors include commonly-shared goals, a strong academic emphasis, high expectations for all students, and a strong sense of community. Catholic schools often are used as examples of effective schools, because many of the characteristics of effective schools are found in them (Convey, 1992). A recurrent theme in the research on effective schools is that good schools have a "sense of community," which has a positive effect on the quality of life in the school. In fact, ample evidence exists to suggest that the community within a school is a key contributor to its effectiveness (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993).

The sociologist and researcher, James Coleman (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987) proposed a framework for understanding the community of a school. Coleman

distinguished between what he called “value communities” and “functional communities.” Schools that are value communities share a common set of values, such as high academic ideals, a preferences for a particular type of educational philosophy, or exposure to a particular type of environment.

Schools that are functional communities are also value communities, but they are more than that. Functional communities operate to produce efficacious outcomes. Coleman noted that schools can have value consistency, but not be functional communities. In a school that is a functional community most of the people whom the students know and to whom they relate both in the school and outside of it, especially the adults, are closely linked. The adults know each other and each other's children. Furthermore, the values to which the children are exposed are the values of the adults in the community. Coleman referred to this as intergeneration closure and considered it to be an essential characteristic of a functional community. In a functional community, value consistency exists between children and their friends, between parents and their friends, and between parents and children. Catholic schools generally not only have value consistency like most other private schools, but they also are grounded in a functional community. In fact, Coleman argued that, indeed, Catholic schools are effective because they are functional communities.

To further explain the effectiveness of a functional community, Coleman introduced the concept of "social capital" to describe the empowerment that results from relationships between persons. Social capital is different from financial capital, physical capital, and human capital. Financial capital describes a person's wealth; physical capital, a person's physical possessions, house, tools, books, and the like; and human capital, a person's skills, abilities, and knowledge. While financial capital and physical capital are very tangible, human capital is somewhat less tangible, and social capital is even less so, because it results from relationships between individuals.

Coleman used the analogy of social networks to illustrate the relationship between human capital and social capital. Each person in a social network has a

certain amount of human capital represented by his or her education, abilities, personality, and other attributes. Social capital results from the relationships that occur within the network. The quality of the social capital is a function of the intensity and quality of the interactions.

The primary functional community for children is the family. Children benefit from the social capital that results from strong relationships between them and their parents. Coleman contends that these relationships contribute more to the growth of children than do the human capital of the parents and the physical resources of the family. Although research has shown that outcomes for children are strongly affected by the human capital possessed by their parents, Coleman argued that deficits in social capital are more serious than are deficits in human capital. Beneficial social capital is produced when parents take an interest in their children and their work by keeping track of school progress, knowing where their children are and what they are doing, talking to them about personal and spiritual matters, and involving them in many of their social activities.

The functional community of a Catholic school is an extension of the family in that it supports the religious and academic norms of the parents who select the school. Coleman saw the functional community of the Catholic school as supporting a strong academic curriculum, as exercising greater control within the school so as to be able to place greater demands upon students, and as providing a communal atmosphere and social resources that facilitate the enculturation of students into the school.

### **Faith Community**

Catholic schools are more than functional communities in the secular sense, however. They are called to be faith communities in the religious sense, dedicated to fostering both social reform in light of Christian values and the personal sanctification of the students (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979).

The importance of developing the faith community in a Catholic school is clearly spelled out in Church documents. In 1972 the Bishops of the United States issued a pastoral entitled *To Teach as Jesus Did* (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972). In it the bishops affirmed the need for and the effectiveness of the Catholic school. In delineating the four-fold purpose of Catholic education, the bishop included community along with message, service and worship. The Catholic school, the bishops wrote, must respond to the challenges of the modern world by developing in its students a commitment to community and to the social skills and virtues needed to achieve it (#109). The building of, and the living of, community must be explicit goals of the contemporary Catholic school (#108). Community, they emphasized, is not just a concept to be taught, but a reality to be lived (#106). For the bishops, community is the necessary condition for, as well as a goal of, Christian education.

Between 1977 and 1997, the Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome issued four major documents on Catholic schools, each of which emphasized the faith community of the Catholic school.

- *The Catholic School* (1977), which addressed the basic mission and identity of the Catholic school, directs that the Catholic school must be a community whose aim is the transmission of values for living. “The Catholic school forms part of the saving mission of the Church, especially for education in the faith.”
- *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to the Faith* (1982) specifies that the educational community of a Catholic school must be in the process of becoming a Christian community, a genuine community of faith (#41).
- *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988) prescribes that the Catholic school must foster an integration of faith and secular subjects. “From the first moment that a student sets foot in a Catholic school, he or she ought to have the impression of entering a new

environment, one illumined by the light of faith, and having its own unique characteristics (#25).”

- *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1997) called for a courageous renewal of the Catholic school in the light of social and cultural challenges. The Catholic school is seen as a place of integral education of the human person through an education of which Christ is the foundation (#4). A Catholic school is a true and proper ecclesial entity by reason of its educational activity “in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony.” (#11)

An essential characteristic of a faith community in a Catholic school is the concern on the part of the entire school community for the faith development of the students. The faith community of the Catholic school doesn't simply happen because the school is Catholic. The entire functional community of the school must actively create and nurture the faith community.

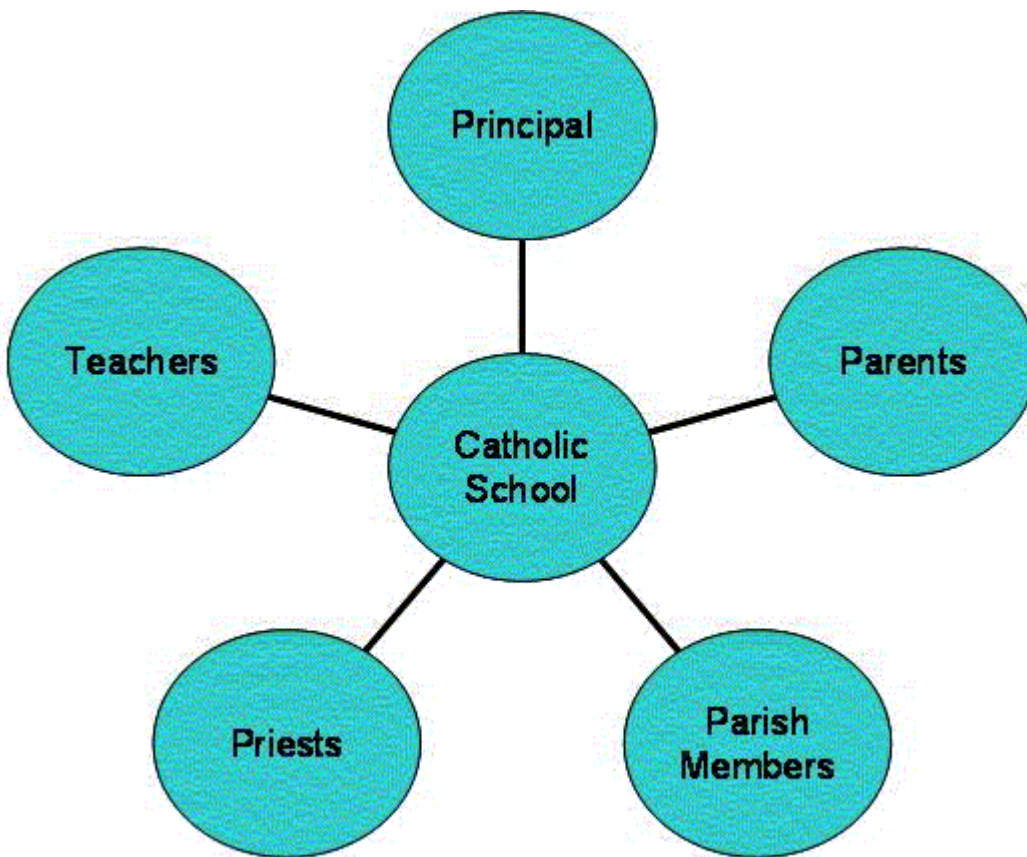
## **Content**

Let's return to the model and examine the content dimension. The religion course is the primary mechanism for communicating Catholic teachings. Most dioceses have adopted a religion curriculum or have established standards that the religion curriculum should meet. In any event, the religion classes should clearly present the teachings of the Church in a manner that is appropriate to the age of the students. In addition, the religion curriculum should follow the guidelines established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in the *National Catechetical Directory*. The communication of Catholic teachings and values, however, should not be limited to the formal religion courses, but should infuse all aspects of the curriculum to the extent possible and appropriate. In so doing, the intellectual environment of the school becomes enriched and students are helped to see that their faith and beliefs are not compartmentalized but are a part of their entire experience.

## People

The next slide shows the various people who contribute to the school's Catholic identity according to their particular roles in developing and sustaining the school's faith community and fostering its Catholicity.

**Figure 2: People Supporting Catholic Identity**



Principal. A principal of any school, regardless of its affiliation, Catholic, public or private, has the responsibility for the academic leadership and managerial leadership of the school. The principal of a Catholic school has an additional responsibility for leadership and that is spiritual leadership (Ciriello, 1994). In a parish school, the principal shares the responsibility for spiritual leadership with the pastor. The principal must create and foster the appropriate environment that

enables a strong Catholic identity to exist in the school. While all in the school community are called to create the community of faith (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972), the bishops in their 1979 document, *Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States* (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979), singled out the principal as having particular responsibility for facilitating its development. The principal is the most important agent in the school in assisting the teachers to understand their role as Christian educators. As a result, the leadership of the principal is essential in maintaining the school's Catholic identity and in creating its faith community.

Teachers. Teachers have direct contact with the students in the classroom and thereby have the most influence on them, so their efforts are indispensable to the school's ability to develop effectively a vital faith community. It's important to match teachers with the philosophy of the school, since part of a teacher's job is to socialize students to behave in accord with the school's values. In hiring teachers, most Catholic schools attempt to identify candidates who will be able to assist in the development of the faith community of the school. The teacher of religion should be a practicing Catholic who is knowledgeable about the teachings of the Church and who has the ability to communicate these teachings clearly.

Many teachers who choose to work in Catholic schools do so because of the school's Catholic nature and their desire to minister to the faith community there. The research is clear that a substantial number of teachers who work in Catholic schools view their work as ministry and their role as one of forming children spiritually, as well as academically (Convey, 1992). Teachers, by their words and actions, must challenge and assist students to become active participants in the faith community of the school. Teachers must look for opportunities to promote the school's Catholic nature and to integrate Catholic teachings into their instruction, where appropriate.

Priests. The visible presence and support of the priests of the parish send a powerful message to all involved in Catholic education. The priests need not be involved in the formal instructional program in the school on a regular basis, but they should be a meaningful presence in the school and participate to the extent that they can in the schools' activities.

Parents. The Church in the document from the Second Vatican Council, *Declaration on Catholic Education*, urges parents "to entrust their children to Catholic schools, where and when this is possible, to support such schools to the extent of their ability, and to work along with them for the welfare of their children." Parents exercise their responsibility as the primary educators of their children when they cooperate with the school by (1) monitoring their child's progress, (2) reinforcing the values taught in the school and (3) to the extent that they are able, becoming involved in the life of the school. The shared values of the parents who send their children to the school form another support for the school's functional community. Parents have expectations regarding the quality of the academic program offered by the school and the school's value-centered curriculum whose focal point is the formal program of religious education. For most parents, the quality of a Catholic school's academic program is a necessary condition for them to select the school. For many of these parents, however, the quality of the academic program is not a sufficient reason. They select a school also because of the school's religious environment and formal program of religious instruction. Parents become important contributors to the school's Catholic identity when they affirm the importance of their Catholic faith by their words and their actions, and when they reinforce in the home what the school teaches.

Parish Members. Despite not being a Catholic himself, Coleman thought that one of the great strengths of a Catholic school is its connectedness to a parish. The members of the parish that supports the school also are important since it is they are part of the larger faith community that research has shown is an

important part of the success of Catholic schools. Parishioners in an extended way form part of the functional community that encompasses the school.

In summary, what is taught, how it is taught, and what the environment is like, are all important contributors to the school's Catholic identity; however, all of these are dependent on the people who administer the school, teach in the school, and support the school, and their individual and collective understanding of what makes a school Catholic and their concerted effort to support and affirm the school's Catholicity.

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I will now turn briefly to the subject of Catholic identity in a Catholic college or university. In 1990 Pope John Paul II issued the Apostolic Constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, as the guiding document for Catholic universities and colleges. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* presents four essential characteristics of a Catholic university: (1) a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the entire university community; (2) continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge to which the university seeks to contribute by its own research; (3) fidelity to the Christian message as it comes through the Church; and (4) an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family (n. 13). The Apostolic Constitution goes on to state that: "In a Catholic university, therefore, Catholic ideals and principles penetrate and inform university activities in accordance with the proper nature and autonomy of these activities" (n. 14). And, further, "A Catholic University, therefore, is a place of research, where scholars *scrutinize reality* with the methods proper to each academic discipline, and so contribute to the treasury of human knowledge. . . . In a Catholic university, research necessarily includes (a) the search for an *integration of knowledge*, (b) a *dialogue between faith and reason*, (c) an *ethical concern*, and (d) a *theological perspective* (n. 15).

As many other Catholic universities have done, at The Catholic University of America we have revised our *Faculty Handbook* to make it more specific as to how a faculty contributes to the institution's Catholic identity. "The ideal of a Catholic university becomes a reality when a faculty affirms and acts upon the principles contained in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. In addition, each member of the faculty has a responsibility to reflect on ways in which his or her research contributes to the university's identity, especially as described in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, . . . , as is appropriate to the discipline in which the faculty member works." A Catholic university's theology department and its required courses cannot alone sustain an institution's religious identity. Promoting the institution's Catholic identity must be the responsibility of the entire university community.

The Church has asked that Catholic colleges and universities embrace the principles of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and incorporate these into their governing documents. Most often when *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is mentioned reference is made to the *mandatum* that the document indicates that all theologians at Catholic colleges and universities should seek from the diocesan bishop. While the issuance of the *mandatum* is important and indicates that a Catholic professor of a theological discipline is a teacher within the full communion of the Catholic Church, this is only a part of what the Church intends about fully integrating the principles of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* into the life of the university. To limit the discussion of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* to the *mandatum* misses the richness of the document that wonderfully defines the nature and essential characteristics of a Catholic college or university.

The principles of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* are evident in the Mission Statement of our host university this evening. The Mission Statement of DeSales University indicates that "the University fosters a vital and respectful dialogue between Roman Catholic faith and human culture." It further states that "DeSales University is firmly and publicly committed to the principles of Roman Catholic doctrine and morality. It also fully recognizes that the search for truth requires an

atmosphere of intellectual freedom and that love demands an openness to all that is good. DeSales University distinguishes carefully between the free pursuit of truth, which it guarantees every member of the campus community, and its own commitment to the teachings of the Catholic Church.”

In summary, Catholic identity is an important component of Catholic colleges and universities, as well as Catholic elementary and secondary schools. While the faith environment of a Catholic elementary or secondary school is easier to create and maintain, colleges and universities will be successful in achieving their own Catholic identity if they remain faithful to the principles given in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.

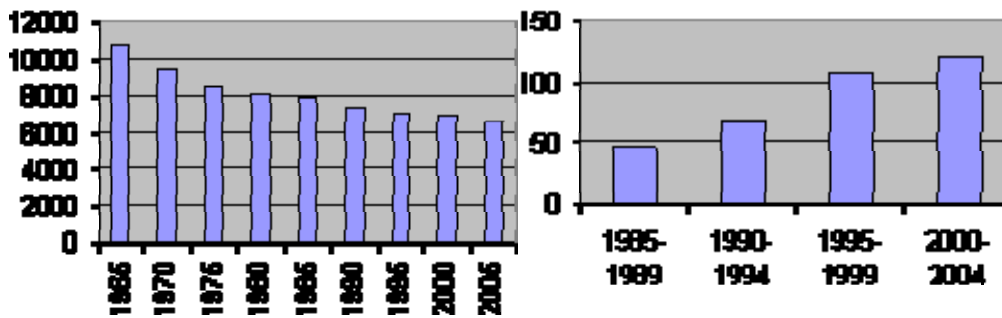
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A few months ago the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate released a study on Catholic elementary schools that was commissioned by the National Catholic Educational Association. The report titled *Primary Trends, Challenges and Outlook* (Gray & Gauthier, 2006), focused on enrollment trends in Catholic elementary schools between 2000 and 2005 and specific challenges that Catholic schools face. The impetus for the study was the concern on the part of many Catholic educators about the number of Catholic schools that had closed in recent years, especially in large urban areas.

The report showed that a long-term realignment process occurring with the Catholic elementary schools for the past 30 years accelerated between 2000 and 2005 with the result that 339 fewer elementary schools existed in 2005 than in 2000. The real story, however, involves the realignment due to shifting demographics.

**Figure 3: Catholic  
Elementary Schools**

**Figure 4: NEW Catholic  
Elementary Schools**



Let's take a look at some graphs. The graph above on the left shows the number of Catholic elementary schools in five-year periods, beginning in 1985. The slow erosion of the number is evident over that period. The graph on the right shows the number of new Catholic elementary schools opened in each of five-year periods from 1985. In comparing the two graphs you can see that, while the number of new openings is accelerating, the total number of Catholic elementary schools continues to decline. The largest decline in the number of elementary schools occurred in the Mid-East and Great Lakes region, which accounted for 80 percent of the decline. The largest changes in these areas were reported by Chicago (32), Detroit (24), Newark (21), Cleveland and Boston (21), and Green Bay, Buffalo and Philadelphia (13). On the other hand, a number of dioceses in the southeast and west reported an increase in the number of elementary schools, notably Raleigh, Memphis, St. Augustine, Tucson, and Colorado Springs. The result of the decline in the number of Catholic elementary schools is seen in the graph below that shows the enrollment changes from the mid-1960s until today.

**Figure 5: Catholic Elementary School Enrollment**

Other findings from the study include:

- In addition to demographic factors, other hypotheses for the closing of Catholic schools include increasing tuition costs, financial situation of

families, weakening attachment to the Church, increased competition from charter schools, and, in some cases, weak leadership.

- The frequency that parents attended Mass is an important predictor of the probability that the parent had enrolled a child in a Catholic school. Catholic parents who attended Mass once a week or more often and even those that attended once or a few times a month were much more likely to choose a Catholic school for their child than parents who went to Mass never, rarely or only a few times a year.
- Older parents who attended Catholic schools themselves were more likely to enroll their children in Catholic schools than were younger parents. In addition, younger parents were less likely than the older parents to have attended Catholic schools themselves.
- A surprising finding for me was that 43 percent of the Catholic parents who responded to the survey indicated that it was not at all important that there is a Catholic elementary school affiliated with the parish where they are registered or where they usually attend Mass. In my experience, where Catholic families choose to live and the parish they attend often are influenced by whether the parish has a Catholic school.
- With regard to the sentiments of parents, the study found that Catholic parents believe that Catholic elementary schools are better than public schools in terms of academic standards, discipline, and the teaching of morals and values.
- The biggest obstacles for parents enrolling a child in a Catholic school are tuition costs (54%) and insufficient tuition assistance (47%).

- I have consistently found these same sentiments expressed by parents whom I have surveyed in the strategic planning studies that I have conducted.
  
- Of particular significance to the theme of tonight's lecture, the five factors that are very important for Catholic parents who have or plan to enroll a child in a Catholic school are: (1) quality religious education – 81%; (2) safe environment – 79%; (3) quality academic instruction – 78%; (4) discipline and order – 65%; and (5) a sense of community – 61%. You can see from this list that the attributes associated with a strong Catholic identity are among those identified by parents as playing an important role in their decisions to enroll their children in a Catholic school.

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In conclusion, the purposes of the Catholic school are to teach about Jesus Christ and proclaim His message and to provide a quality academic program. Each of these is absolutely indispensable. A Catholic school must strive to achieve the highest standards of quality in all aspects of its educational program. However, having a quality academic program alone is not sufficient. A Catholic school must expose students to the religious teachings and values that set Catholic schools apart from other schools.

If, indeed, the purpose of the contemporary Catholic school is merely to be an outstanding academic institution and if the development of the faith community is not as important as the academic mission of the school, then no particular need for the Catholic school would exist. As Michael Guerra, your speaker at last year's lecture has argued before in his writings (Benson & Guerra, 1985), in that case the Catholic community certainly would be well-advised to place their economic resources into other ministries.

An effective Catholic school and a strong Catholic identity go hand-in-hand. Without question, Catholic identity is the value-added and essential component of Catholic education.

Thank you.

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