



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.

SR. MARY BERCHMANS HANNAN, V.H.M.

Keeping Schools Catholic: Lessons from a Long History!

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I am happy to be with you this evening to share some thoughts on something which is dear to our hearts and so important for all our Catholic Schools today. We are fortunate to be living in a time when we are called to play an active role in strengthening and preserving a strong Catholic identity in our schools.

This mission calls us to develop creative initiatives which help us to name and live what we are: genuine Catholic schools dedicated to helping our students grow in their faith. This means building an unambiguous community of faith in a world where identities are frequently blurred.

The United States bishops have given us a blueprint for creating a strong Catholic school in their document, "To Teach as Jesus Did." This document was prepared in response to a Vatican II instruction encouraging Church leaders to clarify the role of Catholic education in the "after Vatican II world." The Bishops envisioned schools that would create strong faith communities among all their

constituents, schools that would provide opportunities for the educational community to engage in Christian Service and, most importantly, schools that would offer students a living catechesis to help them understand their faith in concrete ways. These are the foundation stones upon which we build a school which is unequivocally Catholic.

I have witnessed a beautiful example of such an educational community in a parochial school not far from our school in Washington. The leadership is doing an unusually fine job in creating a comfortable Catholic environment in which its young students develop a close and very tangible friendship with



Jesus. The school has had a lay principal for at least fifteen years, and for many years lay women and men have served on the faculty. They are imbued with a spirit that recognizes the importance of maintaining a strong Catholic identity and are succeeding admirably! At the beginning of each day the principal leads a short prayer service in the parish church. She introduces the saint of the day to the students and creates a special spiritual focus for the day. She and her teachers have created a faith context in very simple terms that the students understand.

I have first hand knowledge of this school because the three sons of our School Head are students at Our Lady of Victory, and I have been amazed to learn from them how much they are in touch with their good friend Jesus. On the morning of his First Communion, the middle son crawled into his mother's bed and said, "Mommy, I love Jesus so much!" WOW!

I was privileged to attend his First Communion Mass and discovered that catechesis is taking place, even in the second grade. The celebrant asked the students what was going to happen when he said the prayers of consecration over the bread and wine. They responded with one voice: they will become the body and blood of Jesus. He then asked them what we call this mystery and again the chorus responded loudly, "transubstantiation!" Amazing for second graders! At least they

can pronounce this big word! I am sure its reality will become more apparent to them as they grow in wisdom, age and grace.

On the secondary school level, our teachers meet a bit of resistance in the realm of catechesis. I believe that our teen age students unconsciously draw a real distinction between religion, which they equate with the directive teachings of the Church and spirituality, which is more subjective. They are in a questioning stage of their lives which makes them reluctant to accept a body of dogma; on the other hand, many seem to yearn for and readily accept a spirituality in their lives. I have heard educators refer to our adolescents as restless believers who are trying to figure out who they are and what they are to believe. At a recent conference for religion teachers and campus ministers at Notre Dame, a compelling speaker, Michael Thiesen, described our typical teenagers' attitude toward religion as "benign whateverism." Can't you just hear them saying "whatever?"

Our challenge is to help our young people move from "benign whateverism" to Catholicism. Thiesen's menu for this transformation is worth reflecting on. He believes that it is best achieved by placing catechetics in the center of community and service experiences and by making certain that the goal of catechetics for adolescents leads them to sharing their faith with others in discipleship.

He advises catechists to view their work with teens from an intentional mindset by asking what he calls three "tree-climbing" questions: How will this lesson lead youth to an active participation in their faith? How can this lesson empower them to be disciples? How does this lesson lead youth to a faith-filled growth? All this, in the context of today's world!

Finally, Thiesen sees a paradigm shift in catechesis which is transforming teaching methods. Instead of seeing teens as the object of evangelization, he sees them as agents of evangelization. To actualize this concept, we must find ways for young people to teach and share their faith.

Although our students sometimes do not accept the teachings of the Church, they are open to a spirituality which will help them live life on a deeper level. This has become especially apparent in their retreat experiences and in their dedication

to Christian service on all levels. Although the adolescent mind is sometimes closed to the directive teachings of the Church, when challenged with a gospel spirituality of building the kingdom in a community of faith, our young people become more receptive.

In addition to the sisters who are engaged in teaching, many of our sisters have a special ministry in which they spend a short time in prayer each morning with students in homeroom. I enjoy these special moments with my small group of students and have been encouraged by their wholehearted participation in and response to our prayer experiences. Toward the end of their last high school semester, our seniors write inspiring reflection papers on their Christian service experiences and meet with one of our veteran teachers to discuss these experiences more in depth. These opportunities allow us to share the richness of our faith with the students in our care.

Christian service is perhaps the best path to the hearts of our students. Opportunities to serve others help young people to grow in so many ways, most especially beyond themselves to experience a bigger and unfamiliar world where they can be of help. Empowered by this realization, they offer assistance not only willingly, but with great enthusiasm, often sacrificing their own interests.

Community is the essence of a strong Catholic school and is fostered in so many ways: through common prayer services, celebration of the Eucharist, the Kairos retreat experience, projects in the larger community to meet the needs of those not blessed with an abundance of this world's goods, and, most importantly, through the sharing of a spiritual charism.

In summary, our young people today are genuine in offering themselves in generous service to the marginalized in their own neighborhoods and in foreign fields. At this stage in their maturation, they are seeking answers about their faith and the presence of God in their lives. They appreciate being part of a community built on faith which assists them in encountering their own faith personally through prayer opportunities, especially retreats and liturgical experiences. We are

challenged to help them find the answers to their questions and doubts so they may become sharers of the faith.

In addition to presenting a strong course of studies in theology, we can also find a way into their hearts by sharing with them a rich spirituality, reflected in the charism which offers our schools a unique gospel-based spirit.

Let us reflect for a few moments on this concept of charism. Cardinal Suenens was one of the major theologians of the Second Vatican Council. He contributed significantly to the breath of fresh air that has flowed over our Church during and after the Council. Among other contributions to the work of Vatican II, he was strong in his support of an expanded understanding of a charism, a concept which he felt had lain undetected, devalued and unrecognized since the early days of the Church.

Simply stated, a charism is a special gift conferred by the Holy Spirit on a group of people, not for their own benefit, but for the common good. A charism cannot be defined in a fixed formula or discovered once for all. Rather it is a living spirit that must be continuously rediscovered if it is to remain vibrant, enabling those who draw from it to meet the needs of their times. After the Vatican Council religious orders were asked to study the history of their congregations and the purpose for which they were founded. This was an important step toward recognizing the spirit which animated their founders, their unique charism. Once recognized, the congregations saw the need to stretch to meet the contingencies of the present time. Only when a group brings its charism to the needs of a moment in history will the charism remain alive and able to animate the life and mission of that group. Recognizing our charism enables us to live it and grow with it to meet the exigencies of our time.

I have been intrigued by a book, published in 1999 entitled *Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-first Century*. This book is a collection of essays given at a symposium honoring Cardinal Suenens at John Carroll University in 1996. Each essay speaks of charisms in specific terms: the Charism of Parenting, the Charism

of Preaching, the Charism of the New Evangelizer, The Charism of the Exegete, The Charism of the Voiceless, to mention just a few.

The editor of this book, Doris Donnelly, describes what she names three surprises about charisms: they emerge not just among people of the Church but in the world at large as needed for the common good; they are found wherever there are human needs, and they are unique gifts given for the common good, never as an individual possession (Donnelly ix).

Although charisms have been traditionally linked to religious orders, John Haughey, in this same book, states that a charism may arise among any group of people who are striving to meet a special need in their world. He describes charisms as “sparks of the Holy Spirit;” trying to define them is like trying to bottle wind or package fire since they take as many forms as individuals receiving them (Haughey 1).

With this broader description of a charism, we can understand how a major corporation such as IBM can develop its own “charism.” The Corporation Employee Handbook contains explicit instructions about how employees are to interact with their customers. The corporate purpose is stated and the behaviors associated with that purpose are outlined so that goals of the organization might be achieved. This effort may be described as a charism. Imagine, an IBM charism!

I recently received an e-mail from Liz McCartney, a 1990 graduate of our school describing an interview she had given on You-tube. She and a friend have established the St. Bernard Project, a corporation dedicated to rebuilding homes in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana that were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. In the past year and a half they have enlisted over 3,000 volunteers to help rebuild over 70 damaged homes. Simply stated, Liz said that if this had happened to her home she would have liked to find assistance to rebuild and so that is what they are doing. The volunteers who join this project are like-minded people who share a common mission: to help people overcome by the loss of their homes. They saw a need and responded to it in amazing ways, with a special charism. It is the power of the

Lord's spirit which enables them to do something they have never been trained to do, but believe in wholeheartedly.

As we have seen, a charism is an outgrowth of Gospel living – a gift of the Holy Spirit, given to animate a group of people to meet a special need. Frequently the charism of a school emerges from a sponsoring religious group. It could also be the spirit of a particular gospel story which names the parish such as Annunciation or perhaps of the saint whose name the school bears. There is a strong movement in our Catholic schools today to adopt the charism of a religious group. I recently heard that several parochial schools have adopted the La Sallian charism as a means of instilling a deeper spirituality in the school environment.

Perhaps your school has a well-defined logo which marks the special identity of the school. It would be interesting to take a good look at this logo and see what it is saying to you today about the identity of your school and its mission.

Our Visitation schools have been blessed with the Salesian charism, which reflects the spirituality of our Founders, St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal. His charism offers many tangible ways to strengthen our identity, not only as a Catholic school but also as a Salesian school. This charism has a universality which appeals to all – religious and lay colleagues, experienced teachers right down to young freshmen. I like to refer to Salesian spirituality as “inspired common sense.” At its heart it calls us to follow the invitation of Christ “Learn of me that I am gentle and humble of heart.” Our spirituality invites us to have our hearts beat in rhythm with the heart of Jesus, by rooting our lives in his loving presence.

We have been making significant strides in the past few years in our efforts to make our Visitation schools strong faith-filled Catholic communities. Mindful of the three priorities established by the Bishops document, “To Teach as Jesus Did,” we have created strong Christian service programs, found ways to strengthen our faith communities and continue to discover new ways to help our students know and share their faith. These are the means we are using to strengthen the Catholic and Salesian traditions on which our schools were established.

Georgetown Visitation was founded in 1799 by three women referred to in our annals as the “Three Pious Ladies.” Archbishop Leonard Neale, the Second Bishop of Baltimore, was the founder of our school and Mother Teresa Lalor was our first superior. It is interesting that these women were not Visitation sisters but three lay women who were under the spiritual direction of Archbishop Neale.] Sixteen years after the foundation of the school these women were admitted into the Visitation Order, founded a century and a half earlier by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal in Annecy, in the French Alps. We are planning to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Order in 2010.

In a letter written to the monastery of Annecy, the American Archbishop describes his purpose in founding this monastery of the Visitation. I quote his somewhat archaic, yet sincere words.

“The total want of such schools as were calculated to impart to the female youth of this country, both the accomplishments suited to their respective stations in life and also Christian principles and sound piety had long been viewed by pious parents with great anxiety and perplexity of mind. The serious and well-disposed of the Catholic community lamented this fateful deficiency ... When behold! It pleased Divine Providence to inspire some pious women who were under my direction to unite and consecrate their abilities and time to the education of young females. Their views were purely religious ...and directed to form a permanent religious establishment whence the inestimable advantages of a correct education might be derived to the female youth not only of the present day but also to future generations as they might succeed in the progressive lapse of time.” Today, we continue this mission as one of those future generations

John Carroll, the first Bishop of Baltimore, had been looking for a religious group to establish a Catholic school for young women; the young men were being cared for at neighboring Georgetown College, which in its early years also had a secondary school. The three pious ladies answered this need and began the first Catholic School for young women in colonial America in 1799.



For 208 years Georgetown Visitation has been educating young women in our faith traditions. The school's Mission Statement today states "Georgetown Visitation, founded in 1799, is a college preparatory school dedicated to the education of young women from a variety of backgrounds. We are a faith-centered community which is focused on educational excellence and rooted in the Roman Catholic faith and Salesian tradition. Our mission is to empower our students to meet the demands and challenges of a rapidly changing and morally complex world. Enriching co-curricular and Christian Service programs complement the academic and spiritual life of the school and encourage our students to develop into intellectually mature and morally responsible women of faith, vision and purpose."

We emphasize the fact that we are a faith-centered community, rooted in the Roman Catholic faith, that we strive to empower our students to meet the demands and challenges of a morally complex world, and that we do this through strong academic and Christian Service programs. Again, we reflect the threefold challenge of the Bishops' document: catechesis, community and service.

In 2004 the Federation Council of the Visitation sisters who sponsor schools formalized a Visitation Salesian Network, with the appointment of a National Director who would be assisted by a National Network Committee. During the past three years the Director and the National Committee have been busy developing ways to strengthen the Catholic and Salesian character of our Visitation schools.

Their initial task was to develop a leaflet which pinpointed the purpose of our Network; namely, to be united in promoting the charism in our school communities by providing opportunities for formation in Salesian spirituality and by encouraging spiritual collaboration on all levels of school life. The goal of this work is to help form minds and hearts through the gospel-based teachings of St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal.

The Committee developed a Visitation Philosophy of Education which emphasizes the fact that our schools are rooted in the Roman Catholic faith and strengthened by their shared vision of Salesian spirituality as a way to God. It speaks of the importance of offering our students strong academic programs which integrate the search for truth with intellectual pursuits directed toward a faith-filled vision of life. Finally it speaks of leadership opportunities which enable our students to become self-directed young women whose broad vision of life leads them to offer their gifts of mind and heart in loving service to others.

With this philosophy of education as a foundation, the National Visitation Salesian Network then developed major goals which we believe should permeate our school life. The Six Goals set forth for our Visitation schools are: to foster a personal friendship with God which leads to a faith-filled vision of life; to integrate a strong academic course of studies with a Salesian spiritual dimension; to build faith communities which call their members to understand the value of diversity and to respect the dignity of each person; to promote the development of liberty of spirit which empowers students to make life-giving choices; to embrace and model gospel values of peace and justice in order to be catalysts for positive change; and finally to encourage an awareness of and care for the gifts of God's creating hand. Each of these goals includes several action steps as practical ways to achieve the goal.

We did not wish this booklet to be put up on a shelf and forgotten so its publication was followed by the development of an assessment tool which each of our schools uses to measure the strength of the Salesian charism in everyday life, as well as the school's progress in living the six goals in concrete ways.

Every five years our schools will promote a self-study to ascertain the strength of the Salesian Charism in their school life and will be visited by a team appointed by the Federation Council. The goal of this process is to create a positive experience of both professional and spiritual growth for members of the school community and a means for enabling Gospel and Salesian values to shine ever more brightly in each educational setting.

The most recent task of the Committee was to develop a Formation Guide for Administrators, Faculty and Staff in our Visitation schools. Every administrator, faculty and staff member received a copy as did the members of our Board of Trustees and the Parent and Alumnae Association Boards.

Signs and symbols throughout the school serve as reminders that we are a Catholic school in the Salesian tradition. In every building and in general community meeting places there are “Live Jesus” signs.

At the opening of this school year our school head gave each faculty and staff member a coffee mug which has a picture of St. Francis de Sales and the Direction of Intention prayer on one side and the school seal on the other. So as we take our first sip of coffee the Direction of Intention prayer is staring us in the face. Quotations about the virtue of gentleness dot the hall walls, and a poster size copy of the Direction of Intention hangs in many classrooms. A statue of Francis de Sales greets people as they enter the school and banners on the street lights along the entrance lane bear pictures of Mary and Elizabeth in the Visitation as depicted in one of our chapel windows. [One of our parents told me recently that as she drives onto our campus each day she prays that she may be an “Elizabeth” to her daughter, always greeting her warmly and lovingly. Her daughter has presented her with some challenging moments!

As you leave the campus there is a picture of our beloved Sister Anne Marie, a unique and well-loved woman who went home to God in 2006, just two years short of her 100th birthday. In this photo Sister is issuing an important piece of advice, “Dearie, please drive gently.”

In the past four years, we have had anywhere from six to nine members of our lay faculty and staff attend the annual Salesian Conference, a wonderful time of camaraderie as well as a way to become more deeply immersed in our heritage.

Our Athletic Director recently returned from an excellent conference at Notre Dame in which leaders of the conference emphasized the importance of integrating the spiritual mission of the school with the competitive spirit so often associated with athletics today. He has developed a “Handbook for Coaches” and an orientation

program for all our coaches so they may become familiar with the Salesian values of our school and may help the students to reflect these values while participating in sports.

Similarly, the orientation program for all new teachers and staff members has a special time and space devoted to sharing our charism. I was thrilled several years ago to hear our Director of Professional Development, a laywoman, introduce this orientation by saying, “Welcome to Georgetown Visitation, a place where you will grow, not only professionally but also spiritually.” I felt we had arrived!

Our students become familiar with the “little virtues of St. Francis de Sales who emphasized kindness, gentleness, simplicity, humility, joyful optimism and thoughtful concern for others, to mention just a few. When faithfully lived these virtues help us to build a loving faith-filled community.

The School Government selects a Salesian virtue of the month, and the officers of each class select the student they believe has best lived that virtue as the “Cub of the Month. (The name of our athletic teams is the “Cubs”). A few years ago the School Government leaders named a “teacher of the month” whom they believed reflected this virtue in her or his life. This teacher then offered a few reflections on this virtue at an all-school assembly. It was a joy to see how wholeheartedly the students offered these teachers a long round of applause.

Senior English teachers last year asked students to write a paper describing how a literary figure they had met in their reading reflected Salesian values in his life. The results were amazing!

At graduation only diplomas and a crescent pin are given; students who have earned academic medals and other awards receive them two days before, at an all-school Academic Awards Ceremony. On graduation day [as each graduate receives her diploma and the crescent pin, representing completion of her four years in the Visitation tradition, our School Head reads a brief vignette describing the gifts this student has shared with the school community. This is our way of recognizing the uniqueness of each individual student and honoring each one for achieving her own personal excellence – significant Salesian values.

When we ask ourselves what signs indicate growth in our school community's understanding of these spiritual values, we notice several landmarks. Occasionally we may overhear one student saying to another, "that wasn't very Salesian" or one teacher gently chiding another with "where is your Salesian gentleness?" At Georgetown Visitation, we are blessed with a School Head who understands the values of Salesian spirituality and lives them while encouraging others to model and embrace these values. He has been creative in establishing programs that foster growth in our charism for parents as well as students, faculty and staff. Hence, the Direction of Intention mug.

The Student Handbook outlines our expectations for student behavior in these words: The Visitation community is built upon fundamental attitudes of faith in God and respect for his creation. This respect is an outgrowth of the virtues characteristic of Salesian spirituality. St. Francis de Sales, a Christian Humanist and joyful optimist, was a strong proponent of the little virtues that make a great difference in any community: kindness, thoughtfulness, patience, courtesy, graciousness, gentleness, simplicity and common sense.

In speaking of academic integrity the Handbook says, "Live Jesus" is the heart of the Visitation community, and the Honor Code shapes a learning environment based on honesty, fairness, responsibility and mutual respect. "Be who you are and be it well," advised Francis de Sales. Academic integrity means that every student should work toward her personal best and not compare herself or her abilities to others.

We emphasize in our school life several elements in Salesian spirituality which offset the pressures of life in the United States today; namely, a sense of balance to counteract the often frenetic pace and demands of daily life; respect for the dignity of each person created in the image of God as opposed to negative stereotypes; an optimistic view of life based on confidence in God rather than a negative pessimistic view; a spirit of simplicity versus consumerism; an emphasis on students becoming their best selves over and against a "follow the crowd

mentality;” a spirit of Christian Humanism reflecting the beauty of a well-ordered life in juxtaposition to a secular mentality that says “anything goes.”

Our Parents Association has asked that we open each of their monthly meetings with a short introduction on some facet of Salesian spirituality. We also open our Board of Trustees meetings with a Salesian thought; the Alumnae Board has now asked for the same Salesian introduction to their meetings.

A message from the parent of three of our recent graduates indicates the value of introducing all members of our school community to the values of this spirituality. I quote:

“I have always been grateful for your regular practice of offering a Salesian prayer or a few remarks referring to the school’s Salesian roots at parents’ meetings and other school events. I appreciate the work that our School Head has done at Fathers’ Club meetings to offer remarks of relevance on Salesian spirituality for our lives. Third I like the banners around the campus that provide a constant reminder of the school’s guiding philosophy. Such initiatives that touch everyone who comes to Visitation in some way, whenever he or she is on campus, create an atmosphere suffused with the Salesian spirit that over time can have a profound impact on how we all live out our everyday lives at school, at home, at work and in the larger community.”

Even with all these signs and symbols and efforts to evoke the Salesian way, we recognize that our students are surfeited with contradictory messages from our present day culture. Often I have felt our greatest challenge rests in building a bridge between the faith culture of our schools and the Abercrombie Fitch styles and “Reality Shows” culture which surround our young people in their life away from school. This remains a huge challenge, but I believe that we walk with faith in the presence of the living God who loves us and supports our efforts.

The most tangible antidote we can offer to the negative aspects of our culture is to create within our school communities a strong faith culture which is adapted to the understanding and needs of young people today. We have to tune into their wired and/or wireless existence: computers, cell phones, i-pods, text messages, etc.

They speak a language that is unfamiliar to many of us, and it is important for us to understand the distractions that this wired existence creates in their lives. Hopefully, by understanding the pressures our young people experience, we can help them to deal with the tensions which exist between the Catholic faith-filled environment which we create in our schools and the demands of our morally complex society.

As young adults they will move into a world populated by people of diverse religious and ethnic cultures, often far removed from the traditions of our Western world. We must help them to become rooted in gospel values that transcend these differences. We must prepare them to meet these cultural differences with understanding and appreciation, but also with a strong sense of their own identity as faith-filled Catholic women and men. Through community service activities they can discover new ways to bring the human touch of Jesus to our suffering world; through strong academic programs they can develop critical thinking skills. With these tools they may be able to evaluate the conflicting values, and make informed life-giving, counter-cultural choices.

In closing I wish to offer a special word of thanks to our dedicated lay colleagues. Never have we been so intentional in naming our Catholic identity. You, our lay colleagues, are assuming this responsibility with grace and a rich professionalism, gifts which have enabled our schools to integrate a spiritual dimension into ever stronger academic institutions.



I pray that our good Lord will bless your generosity by enriching your lives with gentle peacefulness, cheerful optimism and the spirit of kind understanding which you share so beautifully with your students and with one another. These are the qualities that create strong faith communities within our schools where deep spiritual values are integrated with strong academic programs.

To end where we began, we can maintain the Catholic identity of our schools by building strong faith communities dedicated to the service of others, where students learn about their faith in the classroom, but also through spiritual retreat experiences in an environment that is shaped by gospel spirituality.

We are blessed indeed to be living in a time when we are called to integrate faith-filled living with excellent academic programs which prepare our students to share their faith by their living example and their strong convictions. They are the future leaders of our Church as we enter more fully into the age of the laity.

We live in challenging times, but we also live in exciting times. May we experience the joy-filled Spirit of our loving God as we minister to the children in our care; may we help them to grow in new understandings of their faith and may they continue to teach us at least some of the wonders of the world of technology in which they live and move and have their being!

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