

Remarks of Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien at the Pastoral Consultations on Catholic Schools

As previously reported, I met with the priests and school administrators of the Archdiocese this past week to discuss the challenges facing our schools and to seek their input as we begin the process of developing a long-term strategic plan for Catholic education in our Archdiocese. Their input was invaluable, and I will be sharing some of their suggestions in a future column.

What follows are my remarks to the priests, which are very similar to those which I gave to our school presidents and principals two days later. I will provide similar updates throughout the process, which you can monitor through our website, www.archbalt.org

During our open discussion at last fall's Convocation, I pledged that at our gathering next fall, I would hope to present you with a plan that would help relieve the burden weighing so heavily on our pastors and school administrators in their sometimes heroic attempt to keep our Catholic schools open. The idea was very well received.

At that time none of us had an inkling of knowledge that within weeks a precipitous economic slide would begin, a slide which is still in progress without any hint of a turnabout. Indeed, many economists suggest we are still in the early stages of what could be a long and deep recession. Families who rely on our Catholic schools for the education of their children are searching for ways to cope with this financial uncertainty. Our enrollment numbers underscore the difficulty of their task. Our fall enrollment dropped by 5 percent or 1,000 students, approximately double the drop in each of the last five years, and the equivalent of four healthy but theoretically empty schools.

This is a phenomenon in dioceses across the land, and weekly headlines list one diocese after another restructuring their school systems with sometimes radical surgery. Various approaches have led up to these actions and regardless of the

preparatory steps taken, announcements have caused great pain, strong dissention and sometimes deep division and alienation.

The facts that will soon be presented to you will strongly suggest that we as an Archdiocese must soon take energetic and painful steps to reconstitute our Catholic schools, elementary and secondary. Our goal will be to make Catholic education as affordable and accessible to as many Catholic youngsters as possible as well as to non-Catholics in some of our more impoverished communities.

Every step will be taken to ensure that those now in our schools will continue to enjoy a Catholic education. Every step will be taken, together with relevant demographic and financial data, to learn from the successes and failures of other dioceses and to conduct as wide a consultation as possible. That consultation begins today.

Before God and before you, I can state truthfully that at present there is no blueprint as to what we will do. Today and in the months ahead we will be listening to the opinions and suggestions of as many of our stakeholders as we can and come up with a plan of action no later than June 15, 2010. However, as this semester progresses, it is possible that we will have to take some action where a situation would be spinning out of control. We will make it a priority to meet with every group of stakeholders throughout this process, including parents, teachers and other supporters of Catholic schools. For those schools facing immediate and critical challenges, we will expedite the process for allowing those who are most invested in the school to express their concerns and hopes for the school community.

Thus far, I have shared the present status of our school system with our Priests Council in November of last year, and with a committee of pastors from the Council in a number of meetings since then. These have been helpful in charting an approach to what I cannot resist calling a crisis. The Priests Council and its committee will accompany our progress as it goes forward and will be helpful in keeping you informed and in offering us your advice. I pledge to be as candid and transparent as circumstances allow, from start to finish.

We are extremely fortunate to have a Blue Ribbon Committee of experts, all volunteers to pilot us through this complex and far-reaching course. The Committee

is chaired by Mr. Frank Bramble, a parishioner of St. Pius X in Rodgers Forge and a graduate of Calvert Hall College High School. Frank is one of the most respected leaders in our community and is zealously committed to Catholic education in this his home Archdiocese.

Frank has chosen a star-studded committee of volunteer professionals to work with him.

Members have committed themselves to monthly meetings over the next year and a half. All of the resources of the Archdiocese will be at the disposal of this committee.

The lynchpin of our project is Monsignor Robert Hartnett, pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish. As you know, Monsignor Hartnett is responsible for a twelve-year Mount Carmel School system. You know him to be experienced, perceptive and, to say the least, candid in carrying out his responsibilities and expressing his views. He will remain as pastor, and give as much time as is called for as Executive Director of this project. He will funnel all factors and research to the Blue Ribbon Committee as they seek information necessary to make their recommendations. I am most grateful for his agreeing to take on this additional, critical responsibility.

In the end, of course, the buck stops here and what happens between now and then is bound to be full of challenges and surprises. I am ever aware of the importance of Catholic education, particularly in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, its birthplace. My goal, our goal, I trust, will be the strengthening of this precious heritage for the years to come. Unless we act now, and decisively, we will squander that heritage. I plead for the trust and full collaboration of this presbyterate which, so far at least, has been very cordial and welcoming. Such essential collaboration as leaders in this great, historic Archdiocese will go far in writing this unique chapter in the history of our Premier See. I also want to assure our fine administrators, teachers and staff that we are abundantly aware of the anxiety that many of you are experiencing and that we will take special care throughout this process to keep your needs in the forefront.

Finally, may I present some guidelines in our discussion today of the strategic plan to sustain the Catholic school system of our Archdiocese into its 300 years and beyond.

1) While nearly every possible scenario is on the table, one scenario is not. And that is a future that does not include Catholic schools. I am wholeheartedly committed to the ideals on which our Catholic educational system was founded – namely, that our schools serve as vehicles in which we pass down the faith to our children and through which we provide the truth and hope found in Jesus to all children who seek it.

2) The system of schools that was initially created by immigrants and for immigrant Catholic students and gradually became fragmented and disconnected with the departure of religious communities and the movement of Catholics out of the city, must emerge from this effort a school system.

3) All of our parishes – including those with no attachment to a school – must be active supporters of Catholic schools. Education, especially of our youngsters, has long been central to the Church’s mission of evangelization, and thus it is the responsibility of all Catholic parishes to support the teaching mission of the Church.

4) While this in-depth study will focus on our Catholic schools, we realize that Catholic education is not limited solely to those children enrolled in them. Our next effort will be to focus on religious education students to whom we are obliged to pass along the fullness of our Catholic faith. Further, our history of educating both non-Catholic children, as well as those children who can ill-afford a Catholic education but are no less deserving of one, must continue if we are to remain a Church committed to its charitable and civic responsibilities.

5) We must make it a priority to broaden the base of financial support for students in our Catholic schools – including the entire Catholic community, philanthropic organizations and government entities. Schools that rely solely on tuition to subsist cannot continue. The vicious cycle of declining enrollment followed by higher tuitions is financially over-burdening parents and leading our system into a downward spiral careening out of control. If we cannot find other ways of financially supporting our schools, nothing else we discuss today will matter.

6) Consistent with maintaining a strong Christ-centered identity, our schools must uphold a commitment to provide children and youth an affordable, values-based, academically excellent education in a safe environment, and rooted in the sacred traditions of our faith. Graduates of our Catholic schools will be able to take their rightful place in a democratic society and work to incorporate Christ’s teachings into the very fabric of community life.

7) The focus of this committee is to plan over the next 18 months for the long-term sustainability of Catholic education. Meanwhile, we will continue to meet our ongoing responsibility of addressing the real and serious enrollment and financial challenges that pose an immediate threat to some of our schools. The severity of these challenges will most likely compel us to act during the time that the committee is developing this long range plan.

In just a little while, Sister Connie Gilder will be guiding what I consider to be the most important aspect of our meeting today: the discussion period. During this point of the meeting, you will have an opportunity to discuss with those at your table the issues that are before us and your best thinking for how we should proceed as an Archdiocese committed to fulfilling this most important mission. I encourage you to speak candidly about your concerns and suggestions. We are here to benefit from your very best thinking on this issue and can only do so if we engage in a frank and honest discussion.

Our hope is that when we leave here today, we will all have:

- A better understanding of the problems threatening the sustainability of our schools;
- A shared vision for the future of Catholic education;
- An agreement on a course of action that will enable us to realize that vision and fulfill the Church's vital mission of education in our Archdiocese.

I reiterate what I stated at the start of this meeting. Our goal will be to make Catholic education as affordable and accessible to as many Catholic youngsters as possible as well as to non-Catholics in some of our more impoverished communities.