

**Educating Our Children: Opportunities and Challenges from a Faith-Based  
Perspective**

**Islamic Prayer Center of Orland Park**

**Annual Interfaith Iftar, July 6, 2015**

To begin, I want to thank Dr. Kaiseruddin, our host Sheikh Kifah Mustapha, Tabassum Haleem and the leadership of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago for the gracious invitation to speak to you this evening. There are fewer topics deserving more of our attention than education. Why do we educate? How do we educate? Where do we educate? Who should be doing the educating? These and other important questions deserve thoughtful consideration by our religious bodies at the local, national and international level. I am humbled that you have asked me to speak about such an important issue.

I address you tonight as a Catholic Christian. In light of our topic, I want to situate myself more precisely as a Catholic Christian student, instructor and parent. First, and always, I am a student. I learn more about myself, our world and the one God each day. So, I find it helpful to begin with a suggestion that we must not lose our hunger for lifelong learning. We are born students and remain so until our dying day.

Second, I am an instructor. In 2008 I completed my Ph.D. in Theology at Loyola University Chicago. Since that time, I have taught theology courses in

several Catholic universities and in various formation programs of the Archdiocese of Chicago. During this time, I have come to know that there are many challenges and opportunities to be found in the field of education; some related to technological advances, some related to societal changes, some related to rising costs, and some related to figuring out what today's student most needs to know to grow into the future. These are important concerns, but will not be the main focus of my talk tonight.

Third, I am a parent. My wife, Tracy, and I have two children, Abigail and Matthew, who attend a Catholic grade school, St. John Fisher, on the south side of Chicago. My plan tonight is to take some time to explore the educational choices that we have made for our children in order to think through some of the challenges and opportunities that exist in our local situation. Our story is our own, but it is by no means unique. Many in this room have made, or will someday make, similar decisions. Coming to understand how these decisions flow out of an understanding of the purpose, goal and value of education in a faith-based context is essential to come to an honest and informed choice for educating our youth.

Before exploring our particular choices regarding education, however, perhaps you will indulge the theologian in me for a moment as I ground my

thinking in a larger Catholic context. If you remember nothing else of what I say tonight, I hope that it is this: the primary educational setting for Catholics is not the school, but the home. By making this point, I do not suggest that homes are the *only* educational settings, or that choices we make about schools and formal religious education are unimportant; however, families are where we first learn about ourselves and our faith. Because of this recognition, I need to say a few words about the centrality of family for educating our youth.

From its earliest days, Christianity took root in household settings. In the ancient church, Christian leaders, St. John Chrysostom in particular, began to describe the Christian home as a “domestic church”<sup>1</sup>. As the church, the gathered community under the leadership of bishops and local priests, came together to pray and learn about what it means to live a Christian existence, the Christian family was called to mirror this work on a “miniature” or “domestic” level. Thus, as a “small church of the home”, the Christian family was recognized as one of the central formational settings for Christians, especially the very young.

Fifty years ago at the Second Vatican Council, the bishops of the Catholic Church chose to remind us of this ancient term when they wrote, “In what might

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<sup>1</sup> See Norbert Widok, “Christian Family as Domestic Church in the Writings of St. John Chrysostom, *Studia Ceranea* 3, 2013, p. 167-175.

be regarded as the domestic church, the parents, by word and example, are the first heralds of faith with regard to their children” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). By using this particular, traditional language, the bishops of Vatican II ushered in a fruitful contemporary discussion about what it means to teach through modeling the Christian faith in the home.

In his 1981 Encyclical on Christian Marriage, Pope St. John Paul II further reflected on the connection between the church and the home, writing, “The family is a living image and historical representation of the church” (*Familiaris Consortio (FC)*, 49). Families are called to evangelize, or spread the faith, in the fabric of everyday life because, as the former Pope stated, “The ministry of evangelization carried out by Christian parents is original and irreplaceable” (*FC*, 53).

By referencing this image of “domestic church”, my goal is to ground a first and sometimes overlooked principle in Catholic thought, namely, that Christian education begins in the home. One can spend months discerning the best school, work to get one’s children accepted into it, find creative ways to pay for the school, figure out a carpooling system to get the kids to and from school each day, and yet neglect the most basic need that children have: the presence and modeling quality of active, faith-filled parents. Schools are not meant to take

over the role of parenting. At best, they are support systems for the first and irreplaceable teacher: the parent. Again, by no means are schools unimportant, but ideally they are not the primary or even the most effective teachers. Active and faithful parents and committed guardians are best positioned to fulfill the educational task from a Catholic faith-based perspective.

To conclude this line of thinking, then, I would submit that a present opportunity for advancing education is to work at strengthening our families. This task will include more concerted assistance for parents to come to know their religious tradition at a deeper level, so that they can model that faith in the home daily. It will include helping families to deal with the struggles of contemporary marriage and work at strengthening their bond to one another and their community. It will include ways of assisting the growing population of interchurch and interreligious marriages. Obviously, this opportunity presents many challenges. If we remain true to our belief in the importance of the family as an educational setting, however, it is a challenge that must receive adequate attention and resources.

Let me transition from family to school by way of a story. In the summer of 1990, my family was in the midst of moving from southern to central Wisconsin. That 200 mile transition led to a decision about education that changed my life. I

was about to enter high school and was enrolled and accepted into a Catholic High School Seminary in Madison, WI. Now, instead of being 45 minutes away from home, the school was 3 hours. While I pleaded to stick with the plan to send me to this boarding school, my parents (my mom in particular) were not so sold on the idea. It was partly about cost, but it was also about living so far from home at a relatively young age. After countless pleas and some restless nights, it was decided that I would be off to Madison...for a year at least. So began a wonderful four years of learning about myself, my Catholic tradition and the world at Holy Name Seminary in Madison. Perhaps I would have learned these things as well in another place, but I suspect not. Surrounded by faith-filled teachers, priests, coaches and friends, I came to understand myself and my role in the world in a new way. Returning home on the weekends served as a further means of solidifying that experience of learning. This time in a faith-based high school served as the bridge into my studies at a college level seminary and eventually led me to do my graduate work in theology. It was in these schools, reinforced in my life at home, that I grew up as a Christian.

Influential Catholic educator Thomas Groome claims that educators should be concerned with 3 interrelated dimensions of teaching, associated with time. They must concern themselves with the past: what knowledge is so important

that we retain and pass it along? They must concern themselves with the present: what do we need to be learning to meet our contemporary needs, rooted in our experience of the world? They must concern themselves with the future: what do we need to teach to lead our students fruitfully into the “not yet” that awaits?<sup>2</sup>

As parents, the foremost educators of our children, it strikes me that these three dimensions operate unconsciously, or better, consciously, in our decision making processes regarding education. In relation to the past, we must think about what and how we were taught. Moreover, we have to consider what past wisdom we expect to pass along, or perhaps more importantly, *not pass along*, to our children in school. We must not kid ourselves: these choices are political, moral and religious at root. In relation to the present, we must consider what skills and knowledge our children need to excel in the current situation, both local and global. Which available school gives my child the best chance of seeing goodness, truth and beauty in the world in which we now live? In relation to the future, what school gives my child the best chance to thrive in a future that has not yet arrived? Perhaps this forward-looking element is most difficult to discern,

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<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980, pp. 5-10.

but without a sense of the way in which one's present education will provide the skills to grow into the indeterminate future, one can easily see how education can become too short-sighted to give one's child a chance to flourish in the unfolding world.

When it came time to make a decision about the education of my children, a personal valuation of Catholic schools was deeply imprinted in my identity. My encounter with the living God began at home and at church, but it became thoughtful, intelligent and deeply broadened through my past academic studies in Catholic schools. My wife attended a local Catholic high school and the same Catholic university as myself. She too had a deep appreciation for Catholic education. We brought that past with us to the decision-making process.

In terms of assessing the present, we both readily admit that the public elementary schools in our neighborhood are quite good. Moreover, the fact that we had already paid for them through our taxes suggested that we might be better off saving the money we would need to budget for the Catholic school for other important needs. The religious education program in our parish is also well-positioned to meet the religious educational needs of our children. It is with these thoughts in mind that I came to realize that countless other parents think through these very same scenarios all over our city and country each year. I don't

find it helpful to claim that our decision was best for all or that it might not have worked out well if we had utilized the public school system at our disposal.

What I can say is that we made the decision to send our children to the Catholic school based on its present rate of intellectual success and its proven ability to form conscientious Christians. Students consistently leave the school, St John Fisher, with a strong sense of Catholic identity and a knowledge base to succeed in high school and beyond. Were the school not able to meet the basic educational needs for students in Chicago today or were it not able to distinguish itself in terms of identity formation and concern for others, I doubt my children would go there.

We are not alone. A 2014 study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (C.A.R.A.) noted that the top 5 reasons that parents send their children to Catholic schools in the United States are 1) the quality religious education, 2) the safe environment, 3) the quality academic instruction, 4) discipline and 5) a sense of community.<sup>3</sup> The study's author finds, therefore, that "parents are not looking for a Catholic version of their local public school. The

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<sup>3</sup> See Center for the Applied Research in the Apostolate, "Catholic Schools in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Importance in Church Life, Challenges and Opportunities," Georgetown University, June, 2014. Accessed online on June 29, 2015 at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/upload/CARA-Catholic-Schools-Data-Points-white-graphs-2014.pdf>, p. 10.

most distinctive aspect of Catholic schools that lead to enrollment is religious education.”<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, the study found that the main reason for *not* sending one’s child to a Catholic school is the cost of tuition.<sup>5</sup> The challenge at present, therefore, is to make faith-based education affordable, while retaining the high academic standards and religious formation that parents expect. This is no small challenge, but quite an opportunity for our communities if achieved.

In terms of assessing the future, I think we need to be more humble but no less thoughtful. Our understanding is that our local Catholic school provides for the sense of God and self that will become increasingly important in America. As my children’s principal is wont to say, “Catholic education is an investment.” Using imagery borrowed from the banking industry should not cloud her meaning. We are not centered on doing what will make our child most rich, in terms of future finances (although I might welcome this...); rather, this investment revolves around the concept of gifting children with a holistic education. Students consistently leave St. John Fisher with a strong academic skill set, along with a maturing Catholic identity, rooted in the core Christian message of love of God and neighbor. If they continue to live out of that orienting horizon, I expect that

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

they will be able to retain a sense of spiritual meaning and purpose in an increasingly secular social context. My children receive a great education on all of the core subjects, as they must, but do so in an environment of care and Christian identity formation that allows the religious dimension of life to seep through all that they do. For this I am most grateful and, thus, willing to make that long term investment as each month draws to a close.

As I conclude, let me return to the theme of “opportunities and challenges”. We tend to hear more these days about the challenges faith-based education faces in an increasingly individualized and secularized American culture. We hear about the difficulty of paying for private education and hiring competitive teachers given budgetary restraints. We hear about divorce and the harmful effect of marital dissolution on children and their development. These and other challenges are real and must be addressed with thought, planning and prayer.

On the other hand, as we ponder the opportunities for educating our young that exist right here in the greater Chicago area, I am heartened. Christians dining in an Islamic Prayer Center in the heart of the month of Ramadan in order to grow in friendship with and understanding of the Muslim community is perhaps

unthinkable in other parts of the world. We have wonderful schools, public and faith-based, to cultivate our children's curiosity and knowledge. We have religious education programs in our schools, parishes and mosques that pass along our traditions' past wisdom, present concerns and future hopes. We have wonderful families, "domestic churches" in Catholic terms, to provide a backbone of support and nurture for our children. None of these is perfect and all must strive to become better at their inherent educative task. However, it is very good to see that we can dialogue about how to do this better, for the good of our religious communities, our neighborhoods and our world.

This sense of dialogue leads me to recall what Pope Francis said in May of 2014 when he visited the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. In his address he stated,

In our earthly pilgrimage we are not alone. We cross paths with other faithful; at times we share with them a stretch of the road and at other times we experience with them a moment of rest which refreshes us. Such is our meeting today, for which I am particularly grateful. It is a welcome and shared moment of rest, made possible by your hospitality, on the pilgrimage of our life and that of our communities. We are experiencing a

fraternal dialogue and exchange which are able to restore us and offer us new strength to confront the common challenges before us.<sup>6</sup>

I echo these words of Pope Francis tonight and thank you for your hospitality and the opportunity to dialogue about education. May we continue to learn more about one another and grow in friendship in the years to come; restored and refreshed through this and similar communal gatherings.

**Daniel Olsen, July 6, 2015**

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<sup>6</sup> Address can be found at [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/05/26/pope\\_francis\\_to\\_muslims\\_we\\_must\\_confront\\_common\\_challenges/1100987](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/05/26/pope_francis_to_muslims_we_must_confront_common_challenges/1100987). Accessed June 30, 2015.