Without factoring in the possibility of some direct or mediated intervention “from above,” the present sociological prospects for the Church, the Catholic school system, and American civilization are not particularly good. The only chance for our civilization lies with the possibility of a massive cultural revival centered on the resurrection of the natural law, Biblical wisdom, and Catholic social teaching. On the one hand, cultural revivals cannot be merely engineered. But, on the other hand, there will be no chance of a cultural revival in either Church or society without a revitalized Catholic educational system manned by dedicated Catholic professionals and buttressed by cadres of Catholics who are willing to volunteer their services. This paper, first, offers a list of propositions about the state of the contemporary Catholic school in our present time of cultural crisis, and then, second, follows with a list of proposals aimed at assisting in its revitalization.

Introduction

Let me begin my remarks by thanking both Father Peter Stravinskas of the Catholic Education Foundation and the Marianist community here at Kellenberg Memorial High School for the invitation to address such a significant group of Catholic educators. I am truly honored by the invitation. I start with a caution and admission: I am no nationally recognized expert on the specific topic of Catholic elementary and secondary school education. I am, however, a sociologist with a history of sustained research in the area of the study of the mutually influencing relationship between American Catholicism and American society. Indeed, I am hopeful that my status as a, relatively speaking, “outsider” to the Catholic educational establishment might actually be an asset in seeing the “big picture,” that is, the general contours of the proverbial educational forest instead of being blinded by any one specific tree.
Please consider what follows to be tentative, subject to correction, and intended to stimulate thought, debate, and further research. And let me make clear that my remarks, or at least some of them, may not necessarily be consistent with that of the Catholic Education Foundation. And, more specifically, also understand that I recognize the fact that some in the audience will consider the portrait I paint too negative and, derivatively, my recommendations too draconian. I have not come to my conclusions easily but stand ready to be convinced otherwise. Simply put, I believe the hour is late regarding the prospects of forming a healthy and functioning Catholic community in America anytime in the foreseeable future. Given this understanding, Catholic leaders must accept. I submit, the proposition that “everything is on the table” regarding implementing a strategy for the revitalization of the Church and civilization in America. And, as you will see, I place extraordinary emphasis and hope in the idea that a revitalized system of Catholic education, including Catholic K-12 education, can provide the engine for this revitalization.

The title of my talk is “The Necessity of the Catholic School in America in a Time of Cultural Crisis: Propositions and Proposals.” By proposition, I mean a cognitive claim intended to describe accurately some aspects of the state of Catholic K-12 education vis-à-vis American civilization. By proposal, I mean a normative action intended to redress some perceived deficiency regarding the ability of Catholic elementary and secondary schools to fulfill their mission in American society. My paper will start by offering a list of propositions to be followed by a list of proposals. Each proposition and proposal will be immediately followed by a short elaboration and analysis. The paper ends with some concluding reflections.

Propositions

Number one: While there are many secondary roles for Catholic schools, their primary purpose is to develop within their students the ability to think and act with the “Mind of the Church” in terms of the purpose and meaning of life, to make them capable of analyzing all of reality from an authentically Catholic vision, and to move them toward the ultimate and penultimate goals of the Catholic religion, i.e., respectively, experiencing the beatific vision and living a this-worldly existence in service to God and the common good as understood by the Church. As the General Directory for Catechetics (#73) puts it, “In this way, the presentation of the Christian message influences the way in which the origins of the world, the sense of history,
the basis of ethical values, the function of religion in culture, the destiny of man and his relationship with nature, are understood. Through interdisciplinary dialogue religious instruction in schools underpins, activates, develops, and completes the educational activity of the school.” While there is undoubtedly some sliver of contemporary Catholic school children who complete their K-12 education with such a thoroughly Catholic understanding of reality, I strongly suspect that most do not. If true, this is testimony to the reality that, too often, what has actually shaped the student is the non-Catholic culture that exists both outside and inside of the Catholic school, and not, conversely, the Catholic vision properly understood.

Number two: A significant reason why Catholic schooling has too often failed in fully instilling a Catholic vision has to do with the unfavorable cultural and social context in which it has found itself embedded. Simply put, for most of American history, the Catholic school system has had to operate out of very difficult or “crisis-like” circumstances. The Catholic school system has operated out of a social context that was either, early in its history, “generically Protestant” or, now, one dominated by secularism. The only major exception to this was a “middle period” of American history influenced by a common Judaic-Christian heritage. But even here, the very success of the Catholic community in starting to move into the center of American society produced a reaction against what Paul Blanshard and others of like mind saw as an encroaching and threatening “Catholic power.” Part of this reaction required Catholic schools to fight upstream against powerful American cultural gatekeepers whose operant interpretation of Church-State relations tried to make the successful operation of Catholic education difficult, and as much as possible, relegated it to private sphere activities devoid of public recognition and support. This strategy has been at least partially successful, reaching its apogee in the early 1970s.

Number three: Another significant reason explaining the historical difficulty of producing an authentic and effective Catholic system of education has to do with internal deficiencies within the Catholic Church herself in the U.S. These internal deficiencies are dialectically related to the broader state of American civilization.

Early in American history, the Catholic Church was small in numbers, underdeveloped, weak, financially strapped, and mostly ineffective in the area of what the religiously minded call “evangelization,” what sociologists call “socialization,” and what the man in the street refers to as “education.” The early Church had few parishes, and few supporting organizations, including schools, bishops,
priests, religious, and well-formed lay personnel. The result, in many cases, was religious indifference, irregular Catholic belief and practice, conversion to the various forms of Protestantism, or simply devolution to the state of being “unchurched.”

During the middle period of American Catholic history, two developments were most notable and crucial. The first was the introduction of massive waves of immigrants who came to America from Europe. The second was the construction of a well-integrated, functioning Catholic subculture (or what sociologist Peter L. Berger calls a “plausibility structure”) that produced millions of Catholics who were both faithful to their religion and upwardly mobile in the larger society. The functioning subculture was the result of the successful implementation of the organizational blueprint laid down by the majority coalition of Bishops in a series of ten provincial and plenary councils of Baltimore that spanned the years from 1829 to 1884. These meetings called for, among other things, the standardization of doctrine and ritual and the building of a vast array of Catholic organizations, including parishes, seminaries, and, most to the point, schools. Regarding the latter, in 1884, the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore called for the establishment of a parochial school near each parish where one didn’t already exist. While this goal never came close to being fully implemented, the call generated much activity in building schools and aided considerably in constructing the larger Catholic subculture, “brick by brick.”

The contemporary Catholic subculture is now, once again, relatively ineffective as a mechanism of producing authentic Catholic identity and protecting the political interests of Catholics in the American public square and throughout American civilization. The unraveling of the Catholic subculture started in earnest in the mid-1960s. In part, this has been the consequence of significant forces of social change in the larger society. In part, this has been a consequence of the overarching demand of many Catholics for “success” as defined by America’s cultural gatekeepers. In part, it is the result of a massive internalized dissent and crisis in belief having become institutionalized within the fabric of the Church’s organizational life, including her colleges and schools. Regarding the latter development, the Catholic subculture was captured by Catholic progressives characterized by zeal to “update” the Church and apologize for its suddenly unacceptable past. Following the lead of the liberal Baptist thinker, Harvey Cox, the world was seen by Catholic progressives as always “in front” of the Church, whose duty must be to catch up as quickly as possible with the latest cultural innovations and, in many cases, fads. In the terminology of H.
R. Niebuhr’s famous classificatory schema, the Catholic Church was to adopt a “Christ of culture” stance (as compared to either a “Christ above culture” or “Christ the transformer of culture” model). The Catholic self-doubt about the worthiness or necessity of the Catholic educational enterprise was expressed quintessentially at the time by the title of a popular book by Mary Perkins Ryan published in 1964: *Are Parochial Schools the Answer?*

The mid-1960s witnessed another consequence of the widespread crisis of belief prevalent in the Church at the time: large defections of priests and religious from the Church and the religious life, and derivatively, from teaching positions within the Catholic system of education, both in higher education and throughout the Catholic K-12 level. However, the weakened condition of the present Catholic subculture is not primarily from a lack of institutions or organizational ability or financial resources or lack of religious personnel (although these have played some important, albeit decidedly secondary, role). Rather, the present unsatisfactory state of the Catholic subculture is both a result and reflection of a transfer of millions of individuals in their “ultimate concern” (to refer to the term of the Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich) from Catholicism to some non-Catholic allegiance, whether secular or religious in nature. The result of this decomposition and secularization of the current Catholic subculture, as supported by research comparing “pre-Vatican II,” “Vatican II,” and “post-Vatican II” generations, is that the Catholic population has witnessed a steady and significant decline in, first, knowledge of the Catholic faith; second and derivatively, assent to her teachings; and, third and also derivatively, commitment to the overall Catholic enterprise. All of this, in turn, has encouraged the development and growth of outside cultural and political forces that are hostile to the Catholic Church. It is in this context that one can understand both the weakened condition of, and the weakened commitment to, Catholic schooling. The past decade has witnessed a slight and partial turn back to Catholic orthodoxy on the part of some Catholics, including the young, and in Catholic institutional life. The future development and implications of this nascent trend for the Church and her schools are, at present, unclear.

Number four: The difficulty that authentic Catholic education faces today is, in a certain real sense, greater than ever in its history in the American republic. This is primarily the result of two dialectically related forces: the internal secularization of the Catholic community—a form of “Catholic hara-kiri,” if you will—and the growing monopolization of power in an ever centralized society, one progressively controlled by individuals increasingly hostile to the idea
that religion can contribute in a positive manner to the American public square.

Regarding the first issue, i.e., the internal secularization of the Catholic American community, large sectors of the American Catholic population have either abandoned the faith for some other religious or philosophical option or reinterpreted it in such a way as to “get along” with the cultural gatekeepers of American society who now have filled the void once occupied by those sympathetic to a traditional religious vision. The oft-cited claim that Catholics today constitute almost one-fourth of the American population is a fact that can be used to mask the weakened position of Catholicism in American culture. For one thing, the 25% figure is only analytically useful for our purposes when factoring in the huge, mostly Hispanic, migration into the U.S. It detracts from the reality that millions of middle to upper-middle class Catholics have abandoned the Church in one way or another. Some ex-Catholics have left the Church for some more progressive Christian option (e.g. the Episcopal Church) or conservative option (e.g. a Protestant Pentecostal or charismatic sect). Many Catholics today are, in reality, “nominal Catholics.” They have become committed in a central manner to any one of a number of overtly secular commitments even when they formally participate in Church activities (e.g., a political party affiliation, feminism, the “American Dream” of living an affluent middle-class existence, devotion to occupational and career success, etc.) In other cases, ex-Catholics have simply become detached from any organized religious affiliation, with only some vague, amorphous, generic “spiritual” sensibility remaining, a remnant that is impotent in shaping the individual’s thoughts and behaviors regarding the ultimate issues of life, thus allowing some other ultimate commitment to drive the individual in his/her everyday life decisions.

The second issue regarding the weakened state of the Church and Catholic education on the contemporary scene has to do with both cultural/moral developments and structural developments in American civilization. Culturally and morally, America’s elite leaders have progressively abandoned a common Judeo-Christian heritage in favor of a secular worldview consisting of such values as an “autonomous individualism,” religious and moral relativity, utilitarianism, and materialism. If God is perceived as dead, or at least as irrelevant, following a Nietzsche-like logic, then everything is—or eventually will be seen as—possible (e.g. abortion, assisted suicide and euthanasia, same-sex and polygamous marriage, human embryonic stem cell research, cloning, infanticide, etc.).
Structurally, these dysfunctional cultural and moral developments are becoming, or threaten soon to become, enmeshed in the fabric of everyday American life, especially given the exaggerated movement toward the bureaucratization and concentration of power in its public-sphere institutions (e.g. government, the corporations, education, the mass media, etc.). This movement toward bigness, impersonality, and abstraction progressively “frees” the leaders of these institutions from the direct and even indirect accountability to a concerned citizenry, making a farce out of the ideal of representative democracy. Put simply, in conjunction with a secularizing movement in culture and morality that lacks any effective, restraining, transcendent frame of reference, ever more autonomous institutions and institutional leaders are allowed to act, more and more, out of self-centered interest, leading eventually, and seemingly inevitably, to simple corruption.

The combination, then, of the secularization of culture and bureaucratization of the American public sphere represents a deadly combination regarding the health and welfare of both the civilization and of a Catholic Church embedded in such a civilization. Indeed, many might argue that certain sectors of the Catholic Church and community have succumbed to both an internal secularization of thought and the heavy, inward, spiritually deadening, and morally corrupting hand of bureaucracy. And, along with other components of American society, those sectors of the Church and Catholic community—including the Catholic school—that resist these movements are and will be subject to increasingly hostile intentions and actions on the part of the gnostic-like leaders of a secularized American public sphere.

Number five: The general direction of Catholic school education is towards meeting the perceived needs of a privileged upper-middle class Catholic population. Furthermore, meeting the perceived needs of a privileged upper-middle class Catholic population does not necessarily translate into meeting their authentically Catholic religious needs; just as likely, it means meeting the demands of instilling discipline in young people, protecting them somewhat from the excesses of a libertine morality, and providing them the opportunity for continuing the social mobility and high prestige earned by their parents. The point here is not that these latter goods are unimportant but that they are not coterminous with the primary mandate of instilling in the younger generation a Catholic vision of the ends of man and the purpose of life.

Conversely put, Catholic schools are closing in the inner cities, those locations marked by those Catholic and non-Catholic children most in need of both the spiritual formation of the Catholic heritage and
the stability and skills offered by a Catholic school education. In previous eras, the Catholic school system was vital in providing a sound doctrinal formation to counteract what was a pervasive religious illiteracy among Catholic immigrant groups. And the Catholic school system simultaneously aided immigrants in strengthening their moral worldview, producing good citizenship characteristics, and developing practical employment skills necessary to advance in American society. The contemporary Catholic Church is dropping the ball in not being able to address adequately the needs of the contemporary immigrant and minority community in America, a community that needs the help of Mother Church and, yet, could serve as an indispensable vehicle for her resurrection through the infusion of large numbers of newly evangelized and energetic members into the Catholic body.

Proposals

Number one: The most general proposal is that the Catholic Church must rebuild its subcultural integrity. Utilizing the concept of Peter Berger and the late Father Richard J. Neuhaus, this translates into strengthening the Church’s ability to serve as an effective “mediating structure” in American society. The intended purposes of a mediating structure are twofold: to socialize individuals and politically represent them effectively in a public square consisting of such powerful megastructural institutions as the government, the corporations, the mass media, and the public education establishment.

The purpose in strengthening the mediating function of the Catholic Church is not primarily to shield the Catholic community from the larger civilization but to provide a mechanism whereby Catholics can selectively appropriate elements of the broader culture that are positive and life-affirming while critiquing and shaping it from an authentically Catholic perspective or one at least consistent with the natural law. Without an effective Catholic subculture serving as a mechanism of mediation, what shapes the Catholic individual is not the “mind of the Church” but whatever is the prevalent cultural-religious message at the moment. And without an effective Catholic subculture, there is no realistic chance that the Church can serve as an effective agent for both protecting its fundamental right to exist and exercising its God-given duties, including contributing to the common good and the creation of a good society.

Number two: In light of the foundational mission of the Catholic school to instill within individuals a worldview that is consistent with the “mind of the Church,” the most basic proposal...
offered here is for the Catholic Church in this country to change radically her tactical priorities, in terms of her ministries and apostolates. This entails a far-reaching change in her allocation of resources, which are, unfortunately, presently shrinking in light of the Church’s increasing inability to capture the hearts and minds of its members and of the American citizenry. Outside of the administration of the sacraments, there must be something approaching an almost exclusive emphasis given to Catholic education, i.e., authentically Catholic education, in terms of the distribution of its personnel and resources. The ultimate goal—that is, to offer a free Catholic K-12 education to all interested Americans—whether Catholic or not, obviously, is not attainable in the immediate future. However, such a social policy decision on the part of the Church would be seized upon most enthusiastically by those most disenfranchised in our society, especially among significant sectors of the African-American and Hispanic populations.

This proposal would simultaneously be of benefit to the disenfranchised, the health of a now battered Church, and the welfare of an American civilization slipping progressively into what John Paul II referred to as a “culture of death.” One can easily imagine American minorities—including African-American minorities, and the recent massive immigration of Hispanics into the U.S.—flocking to Catholic schools to their significant benefit in numerous spiritual, cultural, and material ways. The evangelization possibilities, both inside and outside of the Catholic Church, would also be enormous. And American civilization would profit by the increase in the number of serious Catholics and Christians promoting, as they would do, a life committed to the common good.

Such a radical change in priorities would naturally impact the degree and nature of support that the faith offers other aspects of its internal ministry and social apostolate. All other aspects of the Catholic social apostolate, if it wants labor-intensive and financial support, should be an activity that the secular state does not fund for whatever ideological reason (e.g. natural family planning, pregnancy care, addressing the needs of those suffering from post-abortion syndrome, settlement or hospitality houses for the homeless and those who are mentally and physically ill, an increase in efficient adoptive services for the children of those parents who choose life over abortion, etc.). While, ideally of course, it is important for all social welfare activity to be performed simultaneously in conjunction with the presentation of Catholic social doctrine, the present weakened condition of the Church does not allow her to do everything for everybody. The following
common-sense sub-proposition should be followed: “If the secular state can perform some social welfare function without violating the natural law, let it do it, at least until the Church’s financial resources and, more importantly, numbers of personnel both qualified and orthodox in religious orientation increases.” Put another way, my social policy proposal views the Church’s main social apostolate through the activities of her school system.

Number three: It is important not to conflate the call to move the Catholic school to the top of the hierarchy in terms of the Church’s apostolates with a mere change in funding priorities. The key to the success of the Catholic school lies in its ability to attract teaching and administrative personnel who are not only accomplished educators, but also well-versed and devoted to a specifically Catholic philosophy of education. Throwing more money on the present Catholic school system would range from representing an ineffective use of increasingly scarce resources to “throwing good money after bad.” What is necessary is to generate a network of academically talented and religiously orthodox graduates of Catholic colleges interested in teaching careers and assist them in securing employment in the K-12 Catholic system of education. The Church must develop and strengthen something akin to a theology and philosophy of authentic Catholic education and practically support this vision by increasing the salaries, benefits, and status of the Catholic teacher. The goal is to generate teachers interested in a long-term commitment to the calling of the Catholic educator, “orthodox Catholic style.” Conversely put, it is not to encourage the Catholic school to serve the function, for more nominally Catholic teachers, of being a mere “halfway” station to employment in the public schools. It is important to note, as an aside, the “lead” position that higher education plays in “setting the tune” and shaping the worldview of K-12 teachers. Simply put, orthodox Catholic colleges with orthodox Catholic professors are needed to produce orthodox Catholic K-12 personnel.

Number four: The Catholic school must increase the scope of its activities to an almost 7 day a week, 24 hour a day, operation. Catholic schools must become the common meeting location for parents, neighborhood associations, political and religious leaders to meet and unite in a common cause to promote the spiritual, cultural, and material welfare of children and all of the citizenry. The Catholic school should work cooperatively with, and provide ancillary services for, individuals and groups with which it hitherto has not had any obvious connection (e.g., homeschoolers, senior citizens, single young adults, etc.). Remediation, child care when necessary, sports activities, academic presentations, and continuing education courses, musical and
artistic performances, Catholic religious lectures, and debates on controversial social issues are just a few examples of the expanded activities that should increase in number in Catholic schools after the completion of the normal 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. work day. In all of this, however, the Catholic school administrator and teacher must respect the position of the Church and the natural law that sees parents as the ultimate authority over their children.

The goal here is straightforward: to create a wholesome and protective environment that both forms young people and re-energizes adults for active and healthy participation in every aspect of existence in the broader society. The Catholic school should become, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, the primary agent for the “Christianization of the temporal sphere.” At the same time, the Catholic school must be constantly on guard against the seemingly universal tendency of large-scale bureaucracies (whether secular or religious in nature) to become self-serving entities primarily concerned with the acquisition of the quite worldly, sociological trilogy of political power, social prestige, and economic wealth/income. The Catholic school must serve the cause of Christ and provide nourishment to those in need and not be primarily concerned with feeding itself.

Number five: The Catholic school also must work cooperatively with the Catholic parish, together forming the social institutional basis for a revival of an active and effective Catholic subcultural reality in American society. While the parish, of course, focuses on the sacramental requirements and needs of the Catholic individual, in the model outlined here, the Catholic school is a more comprehensive institution and tries to address all other needs (e.g., theological, educational, cultural, social, and political). Indeed, assuming that there are enough parishes in a region to serve the existing Catholic population, the priority should be “school first, parish second.”

Given the necessary priority assigned to youth by the Catholic school, the parish should continue to provide extra-sacramental services to its parishioners and the general population, especially the senior citizen population, if and when it can, during the 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. time period. Additionally, bishops should appoint their most accomplished and brightest priests to parishes in the impoverished inner cities and rural areas and, conversely, not reward priests and religious for successful service to more, at least relatively speaking, “cushy,” affluent parishes in the suburbs. Simply put, the “best” must go to where they are most needed: to the battlefield front.

Number six: The point that must be stressed in the promotion of this ambitious and expanded vision of the role of the Catholic school
during our present period of cultural crisis is that support for the Catholic school is not only a means to promote the spiritual mission of the Catholic Church but also is absolutely necessary for the survival of American civilization. Financial and other means of reviving the Catholic school system increasingly must be sought out from the wider civic and business community, from any organization and citizen concerned with the promotion of the common good. And, of course, parents (Catholic and otherwise), in conjunction with sympathetic organizations, must continue to press the case that justice requires that some portion of the taxes paid to government should be returned to parents to assist them in sending their children to the schools of their choice. Also, the case must be pressed that government grants must also be available to any private school that is working to promote the common good, grants that come without any excessive and controlling strings attached.

**Conclusion**

Sociologically—i.e., without factoring in the possibility of some direct or mediated intervention “from above”—the present prospects for our Church, our school system, and our civilization are not particularly good. The modern day barbarians are past the gates, and from their perspective, are now involved in a “mop-up” action. The only chance for our civilization lies with the possibility of a massive cultural revival centered on the resurrection of the natural law, Biblical wisdom, and Catholic social teaching.

Cultural revivals cannot be merely engineered. But there will be no chance of a cultural revival in either Church or society without a revitalized Catholic educational system manned by dedicated Catholic professionals and buttressed by cadres of Catholics who are willing to volunteer their services. This revitalizing task under such present daunting circumstances is both the ultimate challenge and the ultimate calling of the contemporary Catholic educator in America. It is a task I implore you to take up with both enthusiasm and intelligence, with both your heart and your head. And, in the final analysis, heed the words of the late John Paul the Great, “to be not afraid,” and those of Mother Teresa, that God does not demand from you worldly success in your enterprises but fidelity in service to His cause. I thank you.