

Transcript of Keynote Address delivered by  
Dr. Carolyn Woo  
Los Angeles Catholic Prayer Breakfast  
Tuesday, September 20, 2011  
Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, Los Angeles, California

“The Grace and Gift of a Catholic Education”

Good Morning to everyone and thank you for the tremendous welcome I have received. I just want to say I'm completely moved by the hospitality, and most importantly, the spirit of the cathedral. I've only known the cathedral, particularly the beautiful architecture, from public media. I was telling Msgr. Kevin what really struck me was the incredible spirituality, and a spirit and a sense of home for all of you who are here. So I want to say congratulations and also congratulations to Msgr. Kevin for this breakfast, which is running like clockwork. Both the Archbishop and I are very obedient about our time limits! I also want to thank Ellen and Kathy Lund, as well as Tom and Margie Romano, for the incredible hospitality, and for Cardinal Mahony and Archbishop Gomez, who have brought me here. This is a privilege beyond imagination.

Today the topic is: “The Grace (and Gift) of a Catholic Education” and I just want to say it's a topic very dear to me. I owe a huge debt to Catholic education, and I was so fortunate to have my former principal from my high school. I went to Maryknoll Sister School, which was run and established by the Maryknoll Sisters from Ossining. They were missionary sisters who went to China, they were asked to leave China, they went to Hong Kong; they created schools and I got an education. Today I have (with me) Sr. Anne Carroll and Sr. Joan Delaney who are retired in Monrovia and (who) are here. On behalf of all of the Maryknoll girls, and all of the people among us here who owe a debt to the religious; for the work that they have done forming us, let us give them a big hand.

I want to talk a bit about Catholic Education; it's so dear to me. I was educated by the Sisters of Precious Blood in Kindergarten and the Maryknoll Sisters from grades 1 to 12. Because of their services to God, and their incredible journey to leave America for places unknown, they made possible, for me, a career which would not have been imaginable, which would have been completely out of reach.

I was born into a Chinese family in the 50's. There are six children: the two sons, one is to be a doctor and one is to be a lawyer. And they became that. There were four girls and there were no plans for us. Three sisters did not to go to college. I was the fourth of four girls and I was able to go to college and I would say made possible by the Maryknoll Sisters.

What did they give me? Clearly unmatched academics: English, Math, Social and Hard Sciences. In any case, an education that gave me the foundation to receive scholarships for six

years in college, and eventually the foundation for earning a doctorate. It was quite amazing for the nuns working with Chinese girls in Hong Kong.

We started learning English in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and I contended that's because they could not speak Chinese, so one party had to adapt, and it was us for the better of it, but I started learning English in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. We learned pronunciation by going through the Acts of the Apostles and also St. Paul's various travels with unimaginable names of places we've never been but we struggled with those five syllables somehow. We learned not only vocabulary and pronunciation, but along the way we learned how to express ourselves. We learned to formulate ideas of our own. We learned to think for ourselves and we learned to make those thoughts known to others. In other words, we became people with ideas and dreams because we learned vocabulary, pronunciation and eventually the ability to think and articulate.

It was very important that (we) develop a sense of appreciation for the poor. As a legion of Mary we did work in mobile clinics for the boat people and for the factory workers. I was not good as a health care worker but I was good in translating filmstrips on the Eucharist from English into Chinese. I must have messed up the theology somewhere, but you know we needed Chinese filmstrips on the Eucharist. But they helped us understand the other side of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong was a highly capitalistic and very materialistic society. But for 12 hours a day we were with the nuns and they told us and taught us our responsibility.

The nuns had an incredible "can do" spirit. They never had enough money but they always made things happen, whether it was mobile clinics, hospitals, education for the girls, education for the disabled or a social service center for the elderly. Somehow where there is a need they will find a way, and that is very much my motive of operation. I don't take "no" as an answer very easily. I remember the stories they told of the early schools they built where they had no funds. One of the things they did was to give up public transportation as seed money to apply to the British government. Now that is "can do" spirit if you think about "can do." They also taught us to care for each other. We were in an extraordinary competitive academic environment. We take exams in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 11<sup>th</sup> grade to be eliminated. Only a quarter of the people move on to each stage to go into better schools. Instead of us turning on each other, for some reason they helped us become the best of friends. And today I have a classmate from 1<sup>st</sup> grade here, Elizabeth, and we just had a reunion. And so the whole idea on how to work together in spite of how competitive the world is was drilled into us.

But the most important thing they taught me was that God became real. Somehow in those twelve years, running around, going to mass, and not really having much of a clue to the time I left, God was very real because I concluded that if God were not real, these nuns were pretty crazy. And because God was real, it helped me understand how you can go beyond your comfort zone, and that was such an incredible gift. It was the beginning of an adult faith and that adult faith clearly came from catechism lessons and all the Acts of the Apostles and Gospels and so on. But it needed to be a lived faith and Honk Kong is largely a Buddhist society with a very small percentage of Catholics. But to see their faith be lived was the most important

formation experience, and again, the gift of God becoming real by the work, lives and the commitment of these sisters.

So lets go from my youth to today's youth. Lets think about the American teenagers and children. They face a lot of neglect. They face a tough economic environment. 15% of this country's adults are in poverty, 25% of children live in poverty and 10% of adults are unemployed. This is a generation where we have experienced our parents going in and out of jobs. One in two marriages ends in divorce. Consumerism and materialism is rampant and our children get a sense of who they are from the media, which honestly prey on their self worth. Family time is scarce for communicating values and passing on the faith. Adults and institutions are not comfortable articulating boundaries and holding our children to them. Socializing systems such as extracurricular and sport activities are competitive but they are not nourishing. They set in the competitive spirit very early on. And if you look at this, our culture is hostile to youth in an overt way because of poverty, of violence, of peer pressure and an abandonment of different kinds. But our culture is also hostile in covert ways by sending messages to our children that they cannot count on anyone; that they cannot count on society or adults; that in the end, winning is all that matters and that they have to win on their own. It's a culture that diminishes, rather than build up young people. Their values about individualism, "counting on yourself", relativism, "you can do anything," "everyone has the right to do whatever they want", tremendous materialism and emotivism ("whenever I feel good, that must be the right thing to do") lack very much the moral framework, moral discipline and the ability to think about those things.

Let me go and just give you a couple of examples so that you have real questions from young people. My youngest son, Justin, when he was sixteen was a sophomore at Marion High School. One day after Sunday mass, over omelets (this was on October 12, 2003...I was so stunned that I actually recorded it) he said:

"Well, I just want you guys to know that I feel generally hopeless. Terrorism is going to persist. Suicide bombs will grow. No one really wants peace in the Middle East. Politicians don't want to face problems, they just want to get elected. Many kids don't want to work hard. Well I don't have a lot of hope. And the Sunday bulletin said *we should turn our sight to God's world, the eternal life*. Is it because this world just doesn't work?"

So, from a sixteen year old who today is twenty-four, he finished a first degree in theology at Notre Dame, he's in his second year in the masters in Theological Studies at Notre Dame and nowadays, he wants to teach Theology in Catholic schools. But that was a question when he was sixteen.

One time I gave a lecture on ethics. At the end of the lecture, a student kind of timidly raised his hand and said:

“Dean Woo, I don’t want to be disrespectful, but all this talk about ethics; is it real? Or is it just something good and “nice sounding” that people say after they’ve made it to the top? You know, I started from the bottom, I had to fight for oxygen and elbow room...I mean this formula, does it really work?”

In my years as an educator now, I don’t answer those questions. They are profound questions. They are the most honest questions. They reflect where our young people are at. And what I told them was that they should compose an answer, but that their composition should include the good and the not-so-good; that while they observed conduct and behavior, which is selfish, they also need to remember the love they have received from all. And so these are just a few of the things that our kids are facing.

One of my most favorite authors is Sharon Parks, who wrote a book called, [“Big Questions, Worthy Dreams.”](#) She says:

“To become a young adult in faith (which to her meant the capacity and demand for meaning) is to discover about how life really works and what is ultimately true and trust-worthy, and what really counts. And she said that the quality of this composition by our young people depends in significant measure on the hospitality, the commitment and the courage of the adult culture. And if the adults are distracted, if they don’t care, then the composition by young people will only generate very shallow answers.”

One of my colleagues at Notre Dame, Christian Smith, just recently wrote a book about the moral framing by young people and he said he was extremely disappointed. He said that most young people are unable to even articulate what is a moral issue, not to mention the type of framing that they need to engage it. The following is from a New York Times article by David Brooks called [“If It Feels Right”](#), who quoted Christian Smith’s work:

“Smith and company found an atmosphere of extreme moral individualism — of relativism and nonjudgmentalism. Again, this does not mean that America’s young people are immoral. Far from it. They have not been given the resources — by schools, institutions and families — to cultivate their moral intuitions, to think more broadly about moral obligations, to check behaviors that may be degrading. In this way, the study says more about adult America than youthful America.”

In some ways it’s the (example) of the adult and the elders to create the structures and also the example that allows our young people to come into their own as moral beings.

Sharon Parks talks about the quality of these compositions and she said it takes place through two things: institutions and people. I want to cut over to Catholic schools because that is the institution that we’re talking about. Just step back and think about what is happening through the daily events and the annual cycles in a Catholic school. What happens to the many assemblies, lessons, Catechism classes, parent conferences, founders day celebrations, sporting events, celebrations of the Eucharist, social action projects, preparation for the sacraments,

fundraisers, pro-life prayer circles, academic bowls - you know, all the things that happen in a school. What are we really achieving?

The first thing is that Catholic Schools teach our children the Catholic faith. What is it that we believe? Who is Jesus, and how does he matter? How does this faith inform our values and how do these values inform actions? It is also a place of witness where young people are observing the adults and the elders to see if they really practice their faith. It is the commons whereby a community comes together to live, to hang out, to argue, to celebrate personal achievements and passages, as well as to be there to console. How will young people know about the common good if they've never experienced the commons?

The Catholic school is also a place of grace, where conflict and compromises, love and selfishness, success and failures, have a way of being understood, forgiven, healed, and celebrated. Very importantly, it is also a place where we cultivate a habit of worship, whereby the sacraments of the Church slowly become the part of how our students will experience God and to form the habit of worship. It is a place, as our students become older, from five years old to eighteen, where slowly they claim their faith, and as importantly, they claim their place as emerging adults who can contribute to this community and play a role in its responsibilities.

It is a place where our traditions are passed on: Founders Day, May Crowning, Lenten Observance, Advent, penance services, baccalaureate mass, senior retreat – all these activities that are sure to happen with the passage of time. We may take them for granted but it is through these traditions where our values are given attention; where physical actions affirm and enliven our faith. In repetition they become part of our rhythm. Ultimately what we celebrate are not the traditions but the values and the faith that they stand on; and what we do not celebrate, we forget.

And so, as I come to the end of this talk, one of the things to remember is that it is our job, our responsibility as adults, to pass on to the next generation what is most valuable. There is nothing more sad to me than when I meet couples that are from mixed religion: one is Jewish and the other is Catholic, and they say: "We thought the best thing is to not encumber our children with any faith tradition, so that when they are 18 or 21 or 25, they can choose for themselves." Well these are people who have never been exposed to the sense of God! This is not an intellectual taste of whether I prefer opera or musicals. And so it really is the adult's role and responsibility to form that next generation along the values which are most precious to us. And I have to content, the sense of the presence of God is extremely important. What type of communities walk away from the formation of their young? And if not faith, particularly for this group, what else is it that we're supposed to pass on?

Peter Steinfels, in his book "[A People Adrift](#)", talks about two big challenges of the Church: we won't have as many religious, so we have to count on the lay people, and that the lay people are not very well catechized. So the future and the vitality of our Church for the next generation depends on what this next generation will do. In the end it's not just a responsibility but a privilege. This is an inter-generational need to pass on the blessings we have received.

So as I end, I want to say that I know the challenges that we face in Catholic schools. I think that Los Angeles has done an incredible job of being able to have the foundation and the endowment to continue; and not only continue, but to enable Catholic education to really flourish. Across the country we have the challenges, the financial burdens, the tugs with parents and boards of directors and education boards, compensation to teachers and so on. It is not an easy road. But I would say overall the Catholic Church is in a period where it is not an easy role. And we accept this responsibility, not because it is easy, but because the work needs to be done! And for a generation who have been formed by religious in schools and parishes: if we do not pass on the faith well, then the chain will have the weakest link with this generation.

So no, it's not easy work – it's tough work. But it is necessary work. And it is work which is our responsibility and our privilege. And in the end, what we want for young people is the ability, intellectually and spiritually, to be able to ask big questions, to pursue worthy dreams and to have an abiding faith. The work is not easy, but fortunately it does not all depend on us. There is a Holy Spirit and our work will be multiplied and it will be leveraged.

Thank you very much, and God bless you.