

JOSEPH AND EDITH HABIGER ENDOWMENT FOR CATHOLIC STUDIES

Fall 2004 Habiger Lecture: November 2, 2004

Center for Catholic Studies

University of St. Thomas – St. Paul, MN

BROTHER BOB SMITH

Catholic Schools: Wanted and Needed for Today

The following is an edited transcript of Br. Bob Smith's lecture to the University of St. Thomas community on November 2, 2004. Please do not cite or reprint without permission of the author.

INTRODUCTION

GOOD EVENING EVERYONE. There was a man that legend said to be the smartest man in the world, and the king heard about this and decided that he had to have this man, Master Po, as a member of his cabinet. And so he sent out a couple people to find this guy. And they traveled and traveled and finally were told that Master Po meditates down by the river. And so they went down and they saw an elderly man in the lotus position and initially thought to themselves, "Well, this can't be the smartest guy in the world," and so they approached him. And one of the emissaries said, "Are you master Po?" "Yes," he replied. "Well, um, we have good news for you. The king has decided that you will be a member of his court. Now we're going to have to clean you up before we present you, but get up and come with us."

And Master Po didn't move. So the second guy, who was a little bit more brash, said, "Old man, didn't you hear? The king has decided that you're going to be a member of the court, so get up and come." He still didn't move. So now the guy smacks him on the side of the head and says, "Old man, get up now."

And the master, without looking up, said, "It's been said that the king has in the palace a golden tortoise." And the two emissaries said, "Yes, that's true." "And it's said that this tortoise is in a gold box surrounded by silk and jewels." And they said, "Yeah, that's true. What about it, old man?"

Master Po said, “Given a choice, do you think the turtle would rather have been alive in the mud or dead in the palace?” So the guys looked at each other and they thought, and then they said, “Alive in the mud.” Master Po said, “Then I choose the mud. Goodbye.”

It’s about choices. It’s about life and death. Sometimes the gifts of the king in the palace can kill you. And what Master Po was teaching is that everyone has the opportunity and the ability to choose what he or she will do with their life. I’m a believer that God calls all of us to move from where we are to other places, but he also promises that we will never ever be alone.

MESSMER HIGH SCHOOL

I have been at [Messmer High School] for more than eighteen years. One of the first things that I learned was that there was absolutely nothing that my education, my teaching, and religious life could do to help me resurrect the school alone. But there was a hero who actually is sitting in this room that helped me. And I’m not sure if that person knows how much he helped.

Brother Basil, who is sitting back there, is probably one of the most illustrious educators that you have in the state of Minnesota. He also was provincial of his order, but the connection between us is that Brother Basil is a 1934 graduate of Messmer High School. And one of the first things I did when I came to Messmer to reach out to the alums, and so I sent out letters to the 20,000 alums. Brother has been one of the most faithful people in sending back donations, and you need to understand that, as religious, we take a vow of poverty so we don’t have a lot of money. But every time he sends a donation, he also writes a note of encouragement. When I see his name, I get a spark. And when I heard that he was going to be here tonight, I got a bigger spark. And that’s why I call him a hero. Because he’s a person who had and still has very little, but he looked back and said, “That’s my school, and I’m going to do what I can to help it get to where it has to go.” All of us at Messmer will be eternally grateful to him, because what Messmer has been able to do is model for schools around the United States and around the world what is possible.

THE NEED FOR EDUCATION

I got out of prison yesterday. I'm telling the truth. But I didn't do anything. Once a month I do pastoral visits at a Wisconsin prison, and it's probably one of the important things that I do in my ministry. I visit a young man there that has been at this prison for seven years. He made a serious mistake in his life, and I visit him to support him. I visit him because of the reasons that he ended up making that mistake. This young man is probably smarter than most people in this auditorium, myself included, but he has a sophomore in high school education. He can quote the classics, he has a mind that is as sharp as anything I've ever seen, and I could bring him to any of your classes, and he would fit right in. What I didn't know is that his mother was bipolar when he was at our school, had lupus, and had a drug problem. His father ran a crack house. There was no electricity at the house, and so he went from neighbor to neighbor each evening in order to shower and get ready for school. The crack kids would make sexual threats toward him. He was beaten. What I didn't know is that, before he was born, his father told his mother that he didn't want him and he should be aborted. When I visit this young man—and it's the reason I tell you it's the most important thing that I do—he talks constantly about what has helped him to have hope and to look toward the future, whenever that will be when he's released.

The most important things in his life are his faith and his Catholic education. He talks about the nuns in elementary schools, and he talks about the teachers in high school. He talks about what they taught him, as today he tutors 28 inmates at this prison. This young man translates Braille for the blind. He has had three specials on NPR because everyone says he's the last person that needs to be in prison. Well, we can argue about the merits of whether he should be there or not. What we can't argue about is what has helped him believe in a future, and that's his Catholic education.

Now what does that mean today? Earlier today I talked with a group of people about the whole issue of disenfranchisement in the minority communities and how people talk about being held back from voting and other things. If you want to know what the worst

sin of holding people back is in this country, it's education. To stop people or to give them an inferior education is to condemn them to failure. That's what it is. And the most vulnerable are the people who live in our central cities and barrios. And it doesn't matter what city, which state—it's the same. Who are the people who go to those areas? Generally, it's the Catholic Church. They go to places where others are unwilling to go. In many instances, it's simply a continuum of what happened 60, 70, 80 years ago, when the immigrants to this country were Irish, Polish, German, Italian. Today, they are Africans. They are Asians. They are Latinos. They are people who need education the most.

CHOICE IN EDUCATION

I come from Milwaukee, and we have what's called school choice there. My involvement started in 1991—long before religious schools were even thought about to receive vouchers. And why did I get involved in it? Because I kept looking down the block every day or at the post office, at all of the African American and Hispanic kids that were ditching school. Every single day. And I kept saying to myself, "Doesn't it matter that these kids don't go to school?"

And then, as I was looking at kids who were applying to Messmer, and I was reviewing report cards where a kid had 80 absences in a school year—there are 180 days total in the school year. Some kids had 80 absences but were getting B's and C's. Then I understood; it didn't make any difference. As long as you didn't cause trouble, we were going to pass you along. It's called social promotion—one of those dirty secrets. See, in Milwaukee, we have a dropout rate in the public school system of 50 percent. Of the 50 percent who graduate, the average grade is a D+. When you break it down ethnically in the state of Wisconsin, the graduation rate for African Americans is 41 percent. There are some schools in Wisconsin that have no African American male graduates. Zero. In an entire school. That's sin. And it's a bigger sin when you say to people, "Well, you know you're poor, and we think we know what's best for you. You have to stay here." If that happened in the suburbs, there would be a revolution. But it's taking place in inner cities all over the country.

So what's the answer? You don't need to pump billions of dollars into schools. You simply need schools to compete. That's what will improve public schools. And that's what school vouchers do. Vouchers do not support Catholic schools or Lutheran schools or Baptists schools. They simply say to a parent, "Here is a ticket to wherever you want to go, and you can use it at any school—including a public school if you so choose." It should be a right for every parent in this country. The fact that you're poor or you're single should not mean that your child has to go to "a failing school." That's wrong. And Milwaukee isn't the worst in this country. There are places that are much worse. Washington, D.C. You heard I was from Chicago. Bill Bennett in *A Nation at Risk* said Chicago was the worst school system in America. There are many other places, but there have to be signs of hope.

BELIEF IN TOMORROW

This guy that I visit in prison—Jeremy. What keeps him going is that he believes there will be a tomorrow. He doesn't know if he's going to serve eight more years or one more year, but what he does know—and this is why it's most important that I visit him once a month, that I write him once a week—is what he wants to do with his life. Do you know what he says every single time? "I want to serve." He doesn't talk about making money, and as I told you, this guy is brilliant. He wants to serve. "I want to volunteer at a soup kitchen. I want to look at what Dorothy Day did and go to a Catholic worker house." He said, "I'm willing to sweep floors, to mop hallways, but I want to serve." He regrets the mistake he made. He blames himself. But when you look at where that kid came from, he never had a chance. And he's one of many.

Education, as I began—in my mind—is *the* most important thing. And it's amazing how some teachers don't realize how important it is. Today I don't use pencils. I haven't used a pencil in 39 years. Anybody want to take a guess why that is?

I had a teacher that made fun of my writing with a pencil. She put a big fat red "F" on it in fourth grade, and I've never used a pencil since. And my way of getting back at her

was to use pens. Now, did I get back at her? No. I still disliked math. But what she did by embarrassing me in front of the class, I have never forgotten. I remember her name. I remember every wrinkle on her face. And that's the thing about education. Without knowing it, we affect kids in countless ways: when we smile, when we say "Good morning," when we say, "Yes, you can do it." We don't know what lies under the surface.

Every letter I get from this kid in prison I learn something new. He's constantly got a smile on his face, but when you look at the story of this guy's life, it reads like a horror film. You know, when his mother and father unexpectedly came on the same day to visit, it was then that he told me that his father wanted to abort him as a child and that when they come together, it's like World War III. His mother unexpectedly has mental illness attacks, and in prison, if you act up, you will be barred from visiting. That's the only family he's got. And if you take that away, the odds of him killing himself will rise.

So what's the future? Hope. And what does that mean? It means that what you are doing here with the Center for Catholic Studies is important for this university, for this community. And the Catholic Church needs that in America. I wish we had something like this in Milwaukee.

There are also programs like Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) from Notre Dame. I have taken the video that they use to recruit and I have shown it to our teachers at both schools for orientation this year. Why? Because all of those people that are in ACE are certified teachers? No. I showed it to them because it shows committed, hungry, eager, energetic people who went into places that others would not go—with the sense of urgency. And it shows the faces of children light up because they felt that someone cared and they believed that there was going to be a tomorrow. That's why a program like that is so vital. And you need it replicated throughout this country.

Before I got into education I was a parole officer in Detroit, and I saw the other side. I put a number of people in prison, and that's why I rarely go back to Detroit today. I

know they're waiting on me. But seriously, in inner cities, you simply have to look at crime statistics. The crime in inner cities is not Blacks or Hispanics against whites. It's against the very people who live in the neighborhoods. Now, why would poor people steal from poor people? Because it doesn't matter. Why would poor people threaten, shoot, stab and kill other poor people? Because life doesn't matter.

At our house two days ago, I woke up in the morning and saw a wallet in the lot. I looked around and saw that the window of the car of one of our Cap Corps volunteers had been busted the night before as had one of the windows on the bus. I don't condone any of that, but I understand that those things don't mean anything to some people in society because those people have no hope. And if they see no future for themselves, they will see none for you and me. Remember that 50 percent of dropouts that I told you about; there are 100,000 kids in the system, which means that totals 50,000 kids every four years. Where do you think they're going? And the dropout rate in Milwaukee is not the worst in America. At some point we will have to reckon with what happens when there is no hope in society. And the adults have to come up with solutions.

I keep saying Catholic education is important. Why? In the urban centers in America, most of the kids in the Catholic schools aren't Catholic, so why is the Catholic school important? Because you teach religion, because you evangelize, because you pray. That's why they're important. In most of those schools, the faces at the front of the classroom are not minority faces. And it's not an issue that urban schools don't want Hispanic, Native American, African American teachers. There just aren't enough candidates to go around. If I'm African American in Milwaukee with a bachelor's degree, I can go to any company downtown and make double what any school can pay me. And if I have a master's degree, the ladder keeps going up. So why should I go and teach? And my response is, no matter what you're going to do, somebody had to teach you, and you'd better pass it on to someone else.

I want to close by simply saying it's important that what we do in education is give people the very best that's possible. I use a story that if you and I were on a deserted

island together, and you had a loaf of bread and I didn't, you would never go to sleep. Do you understand? As long as you have that bread and I don't, you will never sleep. Because you would know that I'm coming after that bread. Well, that's what we're dealing with in society. The haves and the have-nots. So the solutions are either that I will be selfish with my bread, eat it all, and then both of us will perish. I can give you some crumbs and hope that it will satisfy you—it won't. Or I can share the bread, and we both get fed. The bread in America is education—a high quality education. The Catholic schools are vital.

I used to referee basketball. There were schools that I went into one time and wouldn't go back in again. I know why some kids skip school. There are schools that are run by gangs. There are schools where kids have to go through metal detectors. There are schools where kids are taunted because they carry their textbooks, because education is not seen as being good and cool. In Catholic schools we say to kids, "Uniforms are okay. God is okay. Learning is not only okay, it's essential. And it doesn't matter what ethnic background you come from."

I want to thank everybody for the opportunity to come here and share some ideas with you tonight. I feel passionately about education. I don't want to see any more Jeremys in prison, and that's why I go once a month, why I write once a week. Even though I didn't know about his background, I keep thinking I should have. But there was nothing I could have done to have stopped what happened. But I can surely help him in his future.

There are some of you who I know are thinking about education as a career. I applaud you. You won't make any money, especially if it's in Catholic schools, but you will go to bed every night knowing you made a difference. That's really important. You will put your head on a pillow knowing that you made a difference. And you won't know the long term effect. You could have the next president in your room. You could have the next senator. But you also may stop a kid from committing suicide. You may stop a kid from committing a crime. You may stop a kid from killing a friend. You also will bring God into their lives. If there's any other big problem in our society, it's that there are

many who have never been exposed to God. And there's a richness in our Catholicism that we should not apologize for. We have to share that with people. There are other faiths that do it with abandon. We need to get out there and say this is who we are, this is what we believe, and we'd like to share it with you.