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With 'ACE,' Catholic ed has a good thing going

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

A few years back, Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson faced the grim prospect of closing three under-performing and financially unsustainable schools, one of which served one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. One school, St. John the Evangelist, had consistently low test scores, with only 15% of students reading at grade level. There were many empty chairs at the school which only had 100 students enrolled. The physical plant was in gross disrepair and there was no money to fix it. In the long catalogue of Catholic school closures, St. John the Evangelist looked like it was about to become one more data point in the story of decline.

But, instead of accepting this grim verdict, +Kicanas called Father Timothy Scully, CSC, who runs the University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) and asked for help. ACE began what Scully calls "the most exciting thing we're involved in," and, in short order, produced "a miracle." After working out a new governance model with the bishop, the three Tucson schools became "ACE Academies" with Notre Dame's program investing time, guidance and Catholic identity into the schools. The results were not long in coming. Today, 52% of the students at St. John the Evangelist are reading at grade level and, among second graders, that number has risen to 92%. Enrollment shot up, going from one hundred students to 280 students. There is now a waiting list. Fr. Scully contacted a donor at Notre Dame who owns a successful construction company. "I said to him, "Rather than writing a check, can you rebuild the school?" The donor agreed to do so.

Notre Dame also has two ACE academies in Tampa. "Bishops Kicanas and Lynch are really thoughtful guys," Scully told me. "They understand that desperate times call for desperate measures. Working with

these bishops has been a dream. Every state is different in terms of laws governing private-public partnerships in education, which Scully, who is deeply committed to school choice efforts, says are essential. There isn't enough private money in the world to sustain what we are trying to do in inner city schools.

Fr. Scully founded ACE in 1993 to place the resources of Catholic Higher Education at the service of Catholic elementary and secondary schools. The program's goals have not changed: To sustain, strengthen and transform Catholic schools. But, the initiative has developed in manifold ways. The ACE Service through Teaching program has over 1,300 alumni, of whom 75% are still working in education. The program helps form the next generation of Catholic educators, awarding them an M. Ed. Degree while living in small faith communities completing a two-year curriculum. ACE's English as a New Language program trains teachers to teach English and is currently at work in Chile and Puerto Rico. ACE is also deeply involved with the Congregation of the Holy Cross's pastoral work in Haiti, helping create an educational infrastructure in that most poverty-stricken country in the hemisphere. The Renewing Identity, Strengthening Evangelization program at ACE helps schools enhance their Catholic identity and participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church. The list of ACE activities goes on, and it shows no signs of diminishing, at least not as long as Fr. Scully has breath in his body.

Last Tuesday night, Fr. Scully's work with ACE was recognized by the Manhattan Institute which bestowed its William Simon Lifetime Achievement in Social Entrepreneurship Award on Scully. This award is for lifetime achievement, Scully told the crowd, which means I am as old as hell. If this be true, age is the only characteristic Scully shares with the forces of darkness. ACE is bringing light into the darkness of America's inner cities.

In accepting the award, Fr. Scully challenged the conventional narrative about Catholic schools which seems to be akin to an obituary. Our future is much brighter than people realize. He noted that the Catholic school system was built mostly by immigrant communities that were socio-economically challenged, and that serving the under-served remains an essential charism of Catholic education. The [Catholic] schools are especially important for our children who are most vulnerable, Scully said. Why? Because Catholic schools are indispensable instruments of both human formation and social transformation. Catholic schools contribute to the common good in unique and powerful ways.

At Notre Dame, we're busily engaged in an effort to provide dozens of solutions to what is certainly America's greatest civic challenge, that is ensuring that every child in this country, especially the most vulnerable, has the opportunity for a decent education, Scully told the Manhattan Institute crowd.

Many of the most vulnerable in this country are Latino children. Only three percent of Latino families send their children to Catholic schools, compared to four percent of African-American families. This is not only about the future of the children. It is about the future of the Church. ACE set a goal of doubling that figure, getting six percent of Latino families to enroll their kids in Catholic schools. We are working to make our schools more culturally receptive and sensitive, Scully told me. ACE has also hired field consultants to work in major urban areas, spreading the good news about Catholic education. Scully pointed to the work of one of these field consultants, Rudy Vargas, who works in the Bronx and whom Scully visited with the day after the award ceremony. They went to a bustling Latino Catholic school, Our Lady, Queen of Martyrs. Vargas's secret? He has fifty godmothers, *madrinas*, working as volunteers. They go to the mercados and the bodegas and blanket the neighborhood, Scully said. He credits field consultant Juana Sanchez in Chicago with helping to produce that city's first uptick in Catholic school enrollment in decades.

Fr. Scully did not fly to New York. He took the bus. He and two colleagues at ACE are engaged in a

nationwide bus tour, visiting Catholic schools, listening to their stories, and highlighting their work. Sarah Greene, who has worked at ACE for six years, helped organize the bus tour. "We are stopping at Catholic schools, acknowledging leaders of Catholic schools, and meeting the communities," Greene told me. "Each stop has been different but we want to get out and meet the people who are doing the work. Our overall goal is to celebrate the gift of Catholic education, to raise awareness of how good Catholic schools are and how they contribute to the common good."

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The bus tour started, as all things Notre Dame must, at a football game, in Dallas when the Fighting Irish played Arizona State on October 5. It traveled through the Midwest before heading to the Northeast Corridor. Yesterday, the bus tour reached Boston and it will finish on November 19 in South Bend. In February, the second leg of the tour will visit Catholic schools in the South, in March a third leg will tour schools in Oklahoma and Texas, and in May, the West Coast.

At the tour's start, Notre Dame beat Arizona State and, as a faithful fan, I cheered that result. But the fight for the future of our Catholic schools is tougher than beating Arizona State on the gridiron. To the extent the "conventional narrative" of endless school closures has been changed, it is in large part due to Fr. Scully, Ms. Greene, and the many great people who work at ACE. But, when speaking with Fr. Scully, there is not a lot of looking back. He may be looking out at the world through the window of a bus on I-95, but what he sees is a great future for Catholic education. And, he is making that future a reality, one school, one teacher, and one student at a time.

Here is a link to the video from the award presentation at the Manhattan Institute. Fr. Scully's award starts at about 55:20.

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