

## Keynote Address: Rev. Mark Massa

Mark S. Massa, S.J.  
Boston College, Massachusetts

*Rev. Mark S. Massa, S.J., is the dean and professor of Church history at the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College. He was invited to give a keynote to begin the third Catholic Higher Education Collaborative Conference (CHEC), cosponsored by Boston College and Fordham University. Fr. Massa's address posed critical questions about whether Catholic identity and Catholic Intellectual Tradition are still the focal points for academic excellence in Catholic schools. This question was continually revisited throughout the conference.*

**M**y agenda this evening is to tease out how Catholic higher education has been influenced and can help Catholic primary and secondary education in the United States. In a sense, I suppose I am here to rock the boat a little bit. That is my overt agenda. My hidden agenda is to arrive at the end of our time together having achieved what the Benedictines call the goal of Jesuit liturgy: that is that no one gets hurt and everyone emerges with their dignity intact.

In September of 1955—that is, exactly 55 years ago this month—John Tracy Ellis, the most respected Catholic Church historian of his day, published a small bombshell in the pages of Fordham University's *Thought* magazine. That bombshell was an article with the seemingly innocuous title, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life." Ellis argued that Catholic higher educational institutions played a special role in shaping the larger Catholic intellectual ethos in the United States, and, from his vantage in 1955 anyway, that this was not an altogether happy role. A significant number of Catholic college and university graduates went on to become teachers in the vast network of Catholic grade and high schools, but Ellis used the word "betrayal" to talk about American Catholic higher education's role in shaping Catholic intellectual culture, both in the general population and in Catholic primary and secondary education. Ellis's point was that, far from broadening the worldviews of their students, Catholic colleges and universities were central players in the ghettoizing process of American Catholicism. That ghetto still exists, as any of you who live in Boston, Chicago, or Cincinnati know very well. Those are places where being an atheist means believing that there is no God and the Virgin Mary is his mother.

Ellis (1955), in fact, accused Catholic colleges and universities of four betrayals of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Ellis argued that Catholic colleges and universities in the United States, as a group, were guilty of athleticism, collegiatism, vocationalism, and anti-intellectualism. How was it, Ellis asked, that the 240 or so Catholic institutions of higher education—out of over 3,500 American colleges and universities—were so dedicated to fielding winning teams in football and basketball? Why were places like the University of Notre Dame and Fordham University perceived to be—and to some extent, were—“Temples of Sport” in the popular consciousness? Why all of this celebration of the gipper and the seven blocks of granite? Why did the priest presidents of Catholic colleges invest such large percentages of their comparatively meager resources in sports programs, while other universities, like Johns Hopkins, the University of Chicago, and Washington University, were in the process of (literally) tearing down their stadiums and erecting libraries on the same sites? Why was the prayer of most Midwestern Catholic boys “Hail Mary, full of grace, Notre Dame’s in second place”? Did Catholic Americans have better pigskin or hoop genes than the general population? Why, he asked, did a group of schools comprising less than 10% of the overall number of colleges and universities in the United States always field 5 of the top 10 schools in football and basketball championships? And why did so many Catholics think that was a good thing?

Second, Ellis (1955) asked why was so much energy in Catholic colleges directed toward what he termed “vocationalism,” that is, teaching job skills rather than love of learning for its own sake? Why were there so many Catholic college trade schools with Gothic architecture and so few research engines? Why were engineering and business programs so prevalent, while music conservatories and writing programs so rare? What was the “Catholic Oberlin” or the “Sisters of Charity Swarthmore”? Why was being nice—or being docile—ranked as being more important than being inquisitive or pushing the boundaries of research? Why were Catholic institutions so afraid of instilling a critical faculty whereby students *questioned* received tradition? Indeed, Ellis asked whether the most distinguished professors at places like Georgetown University or Boston College would send their own bright, questioning children to the institutions in which they taught if they got into the Ivies, Chicago, or Michigan, and could pay for it. It is still a good question, I think, as when I walk around places like Boston College and Fordham University I sometimes feel like we are “J Crew with crucifixes”—that is, surrounded by lots of attractive students wearing colors not found in nature, but where intellectual heavy

lifting is somewhat less observable.

Perhaps the most disturbing of Ellis's (1955) accusations against Catholic institutions of higher education was the charge of anti-intellectualism, by which he meant the failure to instill a lifelong love of learning for its own sake. Instead, Ellis asserted that most Catholic college graduates seemed to understand their education as the path to a better job, rather than the production of knowledge, or research for the sake of research. Ellis was building on studies like *American Men of Science*, published in 1944 (Press, 1944). That study examined the most productive educational institutions in the United States in terms of tracking students who went on to research programs in the physical sciences. It had found that well over 50% of American scientists came *not* from secular research institutions like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), California Institute of Technology (Cal Tech), or Johns Hopkins, but rather from Protestant denominational colleges. Topping the list of such religiously affiliated educational institutions sending undergraduates into careers of academic or research science were Kalamazoo, Hope College, DePauw University, St. Olaf, College of Wooster, Wabash College, and Brigham Young University in Utah. The next-to-last paragraph of that 1944 study of colleges producing scientists said,

The list does not include any institutions controlled by the Roman Catholic Church, although a large number of private institutions of Protestant affiliation appear. A closer examination of the Catholic institutions reveals that, without exception, they lie among the least productive of all institutions, and constitute—as a group—a singularly unproductive sample. (p. 1985)

Why did so many graduates of Fordham, Ellis (1955) asked, become lawyers and businessmen, while so many graduates of City and Hunter colleges become professors? Why were Jewish American students—a demographic group almost exactly analogous to Italian and Irish Americans in terms of parental education and economic resources—so well represented, indeed overrepresented, per capita among the ranks of composers, book editors, and university professors? And why was it that American Catholic students, who comprised close to one-third of all American citizens, compared to the 2% of the general population who were Jewish, were so underrepresented in surveys like *Who's Who Among American University Professors*? Ellis's answer was forthright and refreshingly honest: He argued that American Catholic culture itself

aimed to militate *against* original thought or research, being more interested in re-proving the already-known than forging into dangerous new intellectual territory. But at the very end of his article Ellis said,

The chief blame [for a lack of serious intellectual life within the Catholic community] lies with Catholics themselves. It lies in their frequently self-imposed ghetto mentality, and in their lack of industry and habits of work. It lies in their own failure to have measured up to their responsibilities to the incomparable tradition of Catholic learning of which they are the direct heirs. (p. 75)

Ellis's article was published 55 years ago this month. What do any of his accusations about Catholic higher education have to do with today, or, even more to my point this evening, what do they have to do with Catholic primary and secondary education in the United States today? Catholic demographics have changed dramatically: According to Andrew Greeley's National Opinion Research Center, Irish Catholics *per capita* are now, as they have been for 3 decades, the wealthiest and best-educated non-Jewish ethnic group in the United States. The rankings are, from the top, Jewish Americans, followed by the Irish Catholics, ranking above White Anglo-Saxon Protestants and Catholics (tied in the fourth position). Thus, while the media still portrays U.S. Catholics as working-class "ethnics," the vast majority of Catholics in the United States are not only *not* working class, but constitute two of the top four positions in terms of per capita wealth and years of education. The older Catholic subculture, set up to serve first- and second-generation immigrants, no longer fits the needs of a religious community, 57% of whose members can now be safely described as affluent, white collar, and college educated.

What does all of this have to do with Catholic grade and high schools? New York's Archbishop Timothy Dolan (2010) said this in an article entitled "The Catholic Schools We Need," published in *America* magazine several weeks ago,

The academic strength of Catholic schools is unassailable. Graduates of Catholic schools are notable, compared to public school educated Catholics, in their fidelity to Sunday mass; in maintaining pro-life attitudes; in their personal consideration of a religious vocation; and in their support for the local parish. Catholic schools form citizens who are unabashedly believers in the way they live out what is more noble

in our American identity. (¶ 9)

Archbishop Dolan may be spot-on in his listing of the strengths of Catholic primary and secondary school education, but it seems to me that the benefits he lists accruing to the community from its schools seem to fall more into the category of catechesis and character formation rather than intellectual development or curiosity. Look, I am a Jesuit priest who has given up sex for all of this stuff, so I take Catholicism and its needs very seriously. I take Sunday mass, pro-life attitudes, religious vocation, and support for the local Church very seriously. But I am pretty sure those things would not make it into my list of the top 10 things that Catholic education does. I myself believe that a straight row is a happy row, but that is not something on which we should build a philosophy of education.

What do Catholic primary and secondary schools do very well? I would say that they provide an excellent education for urban students, especially low-income students of color. Diane Ravitch (2010), author of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, would agree with me. In the book, Ravitch's views about public education and the public school educational system had been profoundly changed by her "long study of, and admiration for, Roman Catholic education serving low-income Black and Hispanic students" (Freedman, 2010, ¶ 2). That being said, is Catholic education primarily about social uplift, crowd control, producing loyal parishioners, or shaping religious vocations? I have some serious doubts about that. Where is the praise for fostering new ideas, cultivating critical thinking, questioning in an atmosphere of civility, and rigorously questioning inherited ideas? I would like to make three points here. First, my sense is that Catholic higher education has, by and large, failed to challenge the intellectual world of the teenagers who show up at their doorsteps as 18-year-olds. Most adolescents who arrive as freshman at places like Boston College and Fordham University leave pretty much as they arrived in terms of intellectual curiosity, commitment to lifelong learning, and rigorous self-examination of their ideas and beliefs. Many of them arrive as docile, well-behaved, and well-scrubbed adolescents; indeed, their ability to radiate precisely that persona has allowed them to arrive successfully at places like this. That very aversion to intellectual curiosity or thinking outside the box forms the protective shell that keeps them ever having what Margaret Farley at Yale calls "the grace of self-doubt." They arrive at places like this with a firm commitment to the "10 suggestions," as one of my Fordham undergraduates referred to the law delivered on Mt. Sinai, and they leave with pretty much the

same intellectual commitments. The real value system that most 18-year-olds arrive at college with has been labeled by University of Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith (2005) “moralistic therapeutic deism.” Smith lists the 5-point creed of that faith of moralistic therapeutic deism: (1) God is nice, although the word “nice” appears nowhere in either the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures to describe the Holy One. (2) Most people are nice, and therefore most people go to Heaven—Hell seemingly containing only Hitler and Stalin. (3) Religious teachings are true if they work for you. Smith asserts that this third part of the creed reduces God to a cosmic butler, or divine therapist, delivering things to you as you need them, or listening to your concerns when and if you decide to divulge them. (4) Being “spiritual” is more important than being “religious”—a belief quite mistakenly built on the belief that one can have a spiritual life apart from institutions. (5) And most importantly, whatever this faith is—with minor exceptions—it is the faith that these bright young people bring into the classrooms of Catholic primary and secondary schools across the country. This uncritically relative, largely unreflective philosophical set of commitments is what they pass on to their students in primary and secondary schools.

Second, I think that Ellis’s charge of “athleticism” against Catholic educational institutions still holds true half a century after Ellis’s critical article of 1955. I would argue that it is even more true of Catholic boy’s high schools than of Catholic colleges and universities. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, there are 296 public high schools, as opposed to 59 Catholic high schools. But according to the CBS Sports Ranking List (2010), 7 of the top 25 best basketball teams in the Commonwealth are Catholic schools—that is, almost one-third of the top 25 teams are from Catholic high schools, which make up only 19% of the high schools in the state. Indeed, the top two ranked high school basketball teams are both from Catholic institutions: Central Catholic in Lawrence in the number one position, and St. John’s in Shrewsbury ranked as number two. Analogous statistics hold true in both New York State and in Illinois. According to *The Directory of Public and Non-Public Schools and Administrators for the State of New York* (New York State Education Department, 2010), there are 804 public high schools in the state versus 163 Catholic high schools. But 8 of the top 25 ranked high school basketball teams—that is, almost exactly one-third of the teams—are at Catholic institutions. And, exactly like the situation in Massachusetts, the two highest-ranked basketball teams in New York State are both from Catholic institutions: Christ the King in Middle Village being number one, while Christian Brothers Academy in Albany is

second. Brother Rice in New York City, by the way, is ranked fifth, for those of you who follow New York City hoop records. I will not reprise almost exactly similar statistics for Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and California. But the point I want to make is, hopefully, painfully clear: Why are Catholic high schools so overrepresented in these lists? Most of you already know the spectrum of possible answers: to increase alumni support and raise revenues; to attract male students to single-sex secondary schools; to increase public awareness of the school, or to contribute to school pride. But none of the answers offered ever really explain the phenomenon, as almost all studies show that—save for a handful of institutions one can count on one hand—athletic programs almost never *make money* from either the alumni or the general public.

Third and finally—and here I may be revealing my Jesuit prejudices—I think that diocesan schools, that is schools sponsored by parishes—or, perhaps more correctly, schools sponsored by parish pastors—as opposed to grade and high schools sponsored by religious orders of men or women, or schools sponsored by Catholic lay people (like the Whitby School in Greenwich, Connecticut or St. David's School in New York City) are the worst offenders in instilling anti-intellectual habits in students. I base this opinion on a very small sampling—actually, it is based on my own 23-year teaching career at Fordham University. My students from Chaminade, Regis, Gwyennid Mercy, and the Convent of the Sacred Heart were consistently more intellectually curious and better prepared with analytical skills than graduates of diocesan high schools. My own sense is that the pastors of parishes sponsoring these schools have more to do with this than the teachers in the schools themselves. This came home to me dramatically in reading Archbishop Dolan's (2010) remarks in *America*, which I quoted from a few minutes ago: Catholic schools produce docile, loyal, regular mass attendees who respect the Church's stance on birth control, and that is why we need them. I know I am caricaturing Archbishop Dolan here, but not by much. I think all of us, on every level of Catholic education, can do better than this. Thank you.

### References

- CBS Sports Interactive. (2010). *Massachusetts high school basketball rankings winter 2010-11 List*. Retrieved from <http://www.maxpreps.com/rankings/basketball/1/state/massachusetts.htm>
- Dolan, T. M. (2010, September 13). The Catholic schools we need. *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, 203(6), 11-14.
- Ellis, J. T. (1955). American Catholics and the intellectual life. *Thought*, 30(3), 351-388.

- Freedman, S. G. (2010, April 20). Lessons from Catholic schools for public educators. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/01/us/01religion.html>
- New York State Education Department. (2010). *The directory of public and non-public schools and administrators for the state of New York*. Retrieved from <http://www.nysed.gov/admin/bedsdata.html>
- Press, J. C. (Ed.). (1944). *American men of science: A bibliographical directory*. Lancaster, PA: Science Press.
- Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Smith, C. (2005). *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.