

XXV CONGRESO CIEC 2018

Kevin Baxter – The Joy of Innovation: Catholic School Growth in the Age of Francis

English Script – note that I will tend to talk extemporaneously but the following script gives a general outline to what I will discuss. I will do my best to stay consistent with it.

Slide 1:

My name is Kevin Baxter and I am the Senior Director and Superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles(ADLA). I have been in my current role since July of 2015. Prior to that I was Superintendent of the Elementary (K-8) schools, which I began in 2009. I have been a teacher, vice-principal and principal in Catholic schools, always in the ADLA.

It is an honor to be here with you at the Congreso CIEC 2018. I know we share a great passion for Catholic schools and that we all want to see them grow and thrive for future generations. My talk today is about Pope Francis Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel, and how it can speak to our need to innovate, specifically within Catholic schools, so that they can best serve the needs of students and families today.

First a story about Pope Francis. About 2 years ago he blessed us with three new auxiliary bishops. We had a great need in our archdiocese for additional bishops and it was quite a wait so we were very happy to have them. About six months later Pope Francis visited the United States and while he was there he canonized St. Junipero Serra in Washington DC. When Archbishop Gomez saw him in DC, Pope Francis asked him, “How are the triplets doing?” It is ever evident but it is great to see that our pope has a great sense of humor.

Slide 2:

The main idea of the talk is joy. Pope Francis didn't invent the concept of joy but he has clearly articulated how that grace needs to be embraced in order to reimagine our Church for the pastoral needs of today. In the ADLA we are focused on leadership and innovation and I am particularly struck but how much The Joy of the Gospel relates and potentially informs our work. So I invite your input and critique for this talk because our intent is to ‘operationalize’ the living of joy throughout our schools in the ADLA.

Slide 3:

Across the US, there has been a steady decline in Catholic school enrollment over the past 20-30 years. This decline really began in the mid-1960s when we hit the high water mark of approximately 5.5 million students in Catholic schools. Today we have 1.9 million and the rate of that decline has increased more rapidly in recent years. We have seen a number of school closings and some dioceses have gone through massive reorganizations in order to adjust to declining populations.

That is not true, however, for the western part of the US. In California specifically we have tremendous growth, largely driven by immigration, that is significant. I say often that we have

more Catholics in California today than yesterday and we will have more tomorrow than we have today. We have 12 dioceses in the state and six of them are in the top twenty largest dioceses in the US based on number of Catholics. So having a growth agenda for Catholic schools makes sense for us.

We estimate that we are serving less than 10 Catholic school age children currently in our schools in the ADLA. If we were to get that percentage to 10-20% it would be tens of thousands of more students.

We are a large diocese with just under 80,000 students, which would put us as the fourth largest public school district in the state measured by students.

Slide 4-6:

I will just share out the demographic data on the slides to give a picture of the diocese.

Slide 7:

In July last year the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) held a Convocation of Catholic Leaders in Orlando, Florida. There were about 160 dioceses represented and it was centered on Pope Francis' The Joy of the Gospel. At the Convocation it struck me that the JoG was a great road map for how we should innovatively look at what we are doing in both Catholic schools and the Church in general. It seemed to me that we had heard the importance of joy in faith before but that we didn't see people in schools and the Church truly working and living with joy.

And we are not headed on an upward trajectory – Church attendance is declining and people are becoming more disengaged from their faith. If we continue to do the same thing over and over and expect different results – that is the definition of insanity.

Just a context note that I have cited the Joy of the Gospel throughout by simply referencing the paragraph number.

Slide 8:

We will know they are Christians by their love – that is the real mark of our faith. We should be evangelizing and communicating our faith every single day even if we aren't overtly speaking about it. Preach the Gospel at all times and sometimes use words.

“God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy” (#3) – this is a powerful concept to understand – because there is nothing we can do to make God love us any less we have nothing to lose. It gives us great confidence that our work and our lives are where we can have a significant impact.

“Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always “new”.” (#11) – the idea of ‘freshness’ is important here. We have to recognize that our work is to make the Gospel new to those to whom we minister. The Church is

sometimes viewed as static and staid but the message from Jesus is one that is continually new. That newness has to come from those of us who are responsible for delivering it.

Slide 9:

St. JPII came to LA 30 years ago and we celebrated the anniversary in September. During his time in LA he visited Immaculate Conception School, who had a first year principal names Mary Ann Murphy. She was one day on the job when she got a call from the Secret Service to let her know to prepare for the visit. Mary Ann is still principal at the school and she wrote a beautiful blog post on our website about the visit and I would encourage you all to go and read it. But I was most struck by the video I want to show you here. There is no sound but that turns out to be a blessing because it causes you to more closely focus on the faces of the students.

It is also important to look at the faces of the adults – some of them I think looked a bit surprised and in awe of what they are seeing.

After video – Mary Ann informs me that many of the students in the video she is still in touch with and that the visit was incredibly important in their lives. I think this is a tangible example of what Pope Francis is trying to convey – that our joy is irrepressible when it is centered in our faith.

Slide 10:

“One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, ‘sourpusses’.” (#85) – talking about joy is one thing...people feel connected to the ideal and believe in concept that it is a wonderful way to go about their lives. But there are, of course, barriers to joy. Pope Francis refers to those who are cynical and disillusioned and how they can impact the culture of our work places and personal lives. Pope Francis refers to them as ‘sourpusses’, which one bishop in Orlando asked, “How do you say that in Latin?” But we all know examples of people the pope refers to and they can negatively impact our work and personal lives so it is important to identify strategies to deal with them.

One area that we have to be aware of is technology. It is essential to our lives and it is not possible to work and live in our modern world without it. But we have to understand the difference between pleasure and joy. Technology is very good at distracting us with things are entertaining but it isn't as good at providing resources to engender joy.

It is precisely those profound human interactions that help to engender joy and, while it is possible to have them through technology, it is much easier to establish when we are face to face with one another.

Slide 11:

There is a mistaken belief by some that conflict is inherently negative. In Ann Garrido's book, Redeeming Conflict, she talks about conflict as a way that “God matures creation.” Conflict is

not inherently bad, it is only when conflict becomes personally focused, and not centered on issues, that it can become negative to an organization.

If an organization has no conflict then it may not be healthy. That speaks to a static environment where everyone is just going along to get along and there is not freshness or innovation present. But it is important to have conflict on issues and ideas – no on individual personalities. When smart teachers have a debate and disagreement about the best strategy to utilize in order to teach students more effectively, that is a healthy conversation to have. But if it is about the person's own characteristics that will create a negative culture.

If conflict does get personal, it is important to resolve it at the most direct level. The concept of subsidiarity in our faith is important and co-workers need to engage with each other about the issue. There may need to be a mediator present to assist with the conversation but problems arise when one or both individuals go to a third party.

This is the triangle...when we go to a person not connected with the conflict it allows us the opportunity to complain about the other person without any input from that person. We can feel good and righteous because we only have to express the wrongs we believe we experienced and don't have to address our role in the conflict.

Good bosses and managers recognize this and direct teachers, employees – even students in the classroom as appropriate – to speak with the individual directly. Otherwise the third party gets pulled into a situation where they don't have all of the facts and it is very difficult for them to solve the problem and resolve the issue.

Slide 12:

In addition to effectively dealing with conflict, another key strategy to building workplaces filled with joy is forgiveness. One idea about forgiveness that we need to be continually reminded of is that it we forgive for ourselves as much as for the other person. When we are wronged we can experience pain and frustration because of the act but it is only exacerbated when we relive it again and again in our mind. Our own heart and soul suffer because we become bitter and can't fully live with joy.

Thus we must be able to engender conflict, and that will lead inevitably to hurt feelings, so we have to be able to forgive. Even when we are fully wronged, forgiveness can allow us to move on and live more effectively with joy.

A story about two monks conveys this idea clearly. An older monk and a younger monk were walking through the countryside and they came to a river that was running fast. At the same time a noble woman came to the same edge of the river and all three wanted to cross. Seeing that the noble woman was finely dressed the older monk offered to carry her on his back across the river. As he did so, the woman constantly complained about how she was getting wet and how the monk was not doing a good job. When they reached the other side, the noble woman stormed off without expressing any thanks for the generosity exhibited by the older monk.

The older monk simply continued on his way but the younger monk was quite troubled by the attitude of the woman. He walked on for an hour and then another hour and his frustration and anger continued to increase but the older monk continued to walk on peacefully. Finally, after a third hour he couldn't help himself and he screamed at the older monk, "How can you be so calm? You did such a kind deed for that woman and she was so ungrateful and rude. Why are you not upset?" And the older monk looked at him and said, "I put her down three hours ago, why have you continued to carry her?"

"With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew." (#3) – our faith tells us renewal is always possible...reconciliation and forgiveness are essential if we are to live with joy.

Slide 13:

Turn and Talk – some time to reflect and discuss...

Slide 14:

For the shift to innovation I want to provide context for what we are trying to achieve in the ADLA. Our vision is growth and we have a strategy that we have established to achieve that vision. It is built on two key concepts – effective leadership and an innovation mindset that believes we are always in a cycle of continuous improvement.

Leadership – Pebble in the Hole – the challenges that face us are significant and they are long standing. We have a 3.5 million student hole in Catholic schools over the past 50 years. When challenges are significant, it is natural to try and seek out big solutions. But the reality is that there is no large solution to the challenges we face. We get there by taking deliberate steps each and every day with focus and intentionality.

We use a pebble metaphor here – we see the challenges that we face as a giant hole that needs to be filled. But we recognize there are no giant boulders that can fill the hole in one fell swoop. We fill the hole by showing up each day and dropping a pebble in the hole. And good leaders inspire and guide others to also show up and drop a pebble in the hole. This communicates that the challenges will only be substantively addressed over the long term. Most likely beyond our terms and maybe even our lifetimes. But our task is to begin the work.

Faith – the most important work we do – if our schools are not centered on our faith then we are charter schools that charge tuition, and we will never win that competition.

Excellence – we have to focus on being excellent academically. We can't operate like we have in the past when parents would automatically enroll their children in our schools. We have to demonstrate with data why our schools are superior to other options they might be considering.

Stewardship – return with increase to the Lord...we are not 'owners' of our schools. We have inherited them from the saints who have preceded us and our obligation is to leave them in better shape than when we started. Regardless of the length of our term we should be able to point to how the school has improved because of our work.

Innovation – Pebble in the Shoe – innovation can sometimes cause us to instantly think of technology. And while technology can be innovative, it is not in and of itself. There are schools with technology that aren't innovative and schools without technology that are. The goal is building a culture that has every person working to continuously improve. The cycle of continuous improvement is what we mean by innovation because that will result in a continual rejection of the status quo. We should always celebrate our successes but then soon after set new goals for growth.

We use a pebble metaphor here as well – only this time it is in your shoe. The pebble doesn't cause you any pain but does cause some discomfort so you never get to relaxed. When too many people are comfortable in an organization then it will not grow.

PLC Framework to Build Positive Culture that Results in Sustainable Growth – we use Fullan and Dufours Cultures Built to Last as our guide to innovation. The Professional Learning Community framework requires collaborative problem solving so we don't work in silos in classrooms or in schools. We see the work as important as a system as it is for individual schools.

Balance – too tight vs too loose...how we govern ourselves at the Department of Catholic Schools

Systemness – the concept that we are all linked together by our common mission. We are most focused on our own schools but also want to see the system grow as a whole.

Slide 15:

“I dream of a 'missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation” (#27)

In paragraph 27 Pope Francis speaks to the importance of innovation – he talks about ‘transforming everything’ so that all that the Church does can be altered to meet the needs of today's world. The final line is important – there are many schools in the US, maybe not here, who are only focused on maintaining the program. We need to move from maintenance to mission and communicate the importance of addressing modern educational and evangelical needs and not the needs of 30 years ago.

Slide 16:

Change is a requirement for growth...but change is always difficult. That is why it can be hard for Catholic schools to make the choice to innovate. But Eric Shinseki said, “If you don't like change you're going to like irrelevance even less.”

Talk about DLI later but go through different types of innovation.

“Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: “We have always done it this way”. I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking

the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory.” (#33)

We have to abandon the notion that we have always done it that way – it is human nature to have people feel this way because it is what feels comfortable. But feeling comfortable will not allow us to grow.

Slide 17:

How to engender innovation – you have to confront the brutal facts of your current reality. Jim Collins in Good to Great. You have to look at data and honestly assess your reality – what are the issues and what is the truth of where you stand.

Leaders need to guide a process when all questions can be asked. Autopsies without blame refers to the importance of looking honestly at the data but without seeking to point fingers. What the data show simply tells you your starting point. The next step is where you go with it.

Many leaders will point to external or systemic restraints as reasons for the current reality. While those may be true it doesn't help the organization to obsess about them because they are beyond your control. What you can control is the internal reality – the faith formation program, academic quality, effectiveness of teaching, etc.

Slide 18:

To innovate in order to change is difficult – it means sacrificing what we currently are or have with something that is unknown. But looking at the brutal facts requires organizations to hold to competing thoughts at the same time.

Jim Collins in Good to Great coined the Stockdale Paradox, coined after Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was the highest ranked POW at the Hanoi Hilton in Vietnam.

Stockdale Paradox – absolute faith that you will prevail AND confront the brutal facts

“I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, ***I would not trade.***” (p. 85, G2G)

The blind optimists didn't make it out

“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.” (p. 85, G2G) - ***You have to deal with the honest reality but never lose faith***

“I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.” (#49)

Slide 19:

Dual Language Immersion – implementation of DLI addresses both the linguistic and educational needs of our students and families. They have proven to be extremely successful thus far and are an example of how innovative approaches to Catholic schools can lead to growth.

Slide 20:

High school innovation – we have 51 high schools in the ADLA and all are offering a college prep curriculum. Our primary focus should always be to meet the need of our students and our parents and we should be willing to look at new models at the high school level.

Slide 21:

“Some people nowadays console themselves by saying that things are not as easy as they used to be, yet we know that the Roman empire was not conducive to the Gospel message, the struggle for justice, or the defense of human dignity. Every period of history is marked by the presence of human weakness, self-absorption, complacency and selfishness, to say nothing of the concupiscence which preys upon us all. These things are ever present under one guise or another; they are due to our human limits rather than particular situations. **Let us not say, then, that things are harder today; they are simply different.** But let us learn also from the saints who have gone before us, who confronted the difficulties of their own day.” (#263)

I heard a quote recently that struck me as being particularly relevant to this slide...that nostalgia is history without the pain. We can idealize the past and wrongly convince ourselves that it was somehow better than today. First, it wasn't – they had problems back then as much as we do today. And second, as people of faith we believe that we are the ones God has chosen to work and lead in Catholic schools at this time. He has faith in us – we need to have faith in ourselves.

Slide 22:

Between stimulus and response...

This is one of my favorite quotes...read the quote and describe it. We have been provided with a large stimulus in the form of enrollment decline. The positive part of this is that human beings are the one creature on earth who can operate against a stimulus. Other organisms will always respond – the plant grows toward the light, the dog will eat the steak. But we can say no to the jelly donut!

This should give us hope...because the stimulus that is before us can be intimidating and our inclination could be to crawl into a fetal position and give up. But our response is how we will grow. We have to confront the brutal facts of our reality in order to look innovatively to the future and ensure that Catholic schools are sustainable for future generations.

Slide 23:

Contact information.

