

GSHJ

# The Catholic Teacher in a Rapidly Developing Digital World

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## CREDI Graduation Address

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### Introduction

Congratulations, Graduates! You have worked hard! You have run the race! You have succeeded! It is time to celebrate! Graduation is a kairos moment! This is a moment to renew our commitment for becoming the best teachers, administrators and mentors for all persons who will cross the threshold of our lives.

Dr. Jules asked me to address the designated theme of this graduation **“The Catholic Teacher in a Rapidly Developing Digital World”**. I was humbled and thrilled to explore a few epiphanies that command my research and study as I work with Catholic educators across the United States and dialogue with educators around the world. Three

points weave the tapestry of my message today: **First**, *Our Vocation: Called to be Artists*; **Second**, *The Reality: A New Learning Ecology*; and, **Third**, *The Challenge: In Search for the Experience of Great Mystery in a Digital Culture*

## **Our Vocation: Called to be Artists**

Each of you are ‘artists’ and you are to create a masterpiece with your life!

As educators, we all have a favorite subject, or course we love to teach, or facilitate learning in, because it resonates with a deep passion and love within us! This is what makes a great teacher! The focus and the content of the course is alive, stimulating ongoing wonder and curiosity. Our own passion triggers new aspirations within our students! We truly experience the subject as ‘living knowledge’!

One of my favorite undergraduate courses at the University of Dayton is the Chaminade Scholars Honors course titled **Vocation and the Arts**. The course is grounded in Blessed John Paul II’s beautiful *Apostolic Letter to Artists* (1999) and Pope Benedict XVI’s *Address to Artists* (2009). Blessed John Paul II wrote: “**Not all are called to be artists in the specific**

sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece.”<sup>i</sup> The idea of our calling being one to create a masterpiece of our lives should chime in our minds and hearts each morning we rise from our beds. We are called to be artists!

Whether we are engaged with science, technology, engineering, math (STEM), art, religion, music, or literature– we are **practicing our vocation as artists!** The concept of being an artist makes a difference in discerning and living our vocation as educators.

**Our vocation, our calling, is of the noblest kind there is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.** Educators, and especially Catholic Educators, need to embrace the fact that our work is an **ecclesial act** – it is a work of the Church. Today it is a particularly bold work within a rapidly expanding digital culture, or civilization. This digital culture is informing, forming and transforming our students, the digital natives, with quantum speed.

We stand on the threshold of a new educational missionary frontier. There is much for us to learn of how to navigate through the vast digital

portals for designing effective ways for stimulating the imagination, particularly the religious imagination of our students.

Let's take a moment and explore the reality of this digital culture, or civilization as it impacts our vocation as artists!

## **The Reality Dimensions of the Digital Culture**

**The Rip Van Winkle Syndrome!** One day we rolled out of bed, went to work, or, came to school and discovered the whole world changed while we were asleep! You know what I mean! No one asked our permission! It simply changed! A new educational revolution entered our lives directly or indirectly and was already influencing our student's lives. They are 'wired' in more ways than one! They are connected by wireless devices that command their attention 24/7. We discovered that our classrooms had less technology than our students possessed.<sup>ii</sup> It was clear! How our children engaged and processed information had changed. Yet, we were still in the industrial age mode of teaching and learning!<sup>iii</sup> Our

students simply were not connecting with us and we had to ask ourselves why?

Well there are many variables for answering this question, I will address a few that currently interest me, particularly as a Catholic educator of over 40 years, as I strive to see the new digital milieu as a gift evoking a call and not a threat provoking fear!

This does not mean I am not aware of the dark side of the digital milieu, e.g. the rapid invasion of cybercrime, cyber bullying, cyber warriors, cybersex, crises of privacy vs. transparency, and the immediate impact on interpersonal day to day human relationships and family cohesion.

I face these challenges head on believing firmly that education, particularly Catholic education, can and does offer a value added dimension in the face of a new digital civilization. We have the blessed opportunity to inform and form digital natives who are transforming the digital milieu even now as I stand here speaking with you. The vast majority of the digital cultural designers are under 19 years old, if not 14 and 15! <sup>iv</sup>They possess an intuitive curiosity for manipulating and

engaging in virtual worlds, for exploring new digital frontiers. They are filling the **vacuum** in their lives of **a lack of intimacy and interpersonal relationships** by creating circles of friends online, tweeting or tumbling trivial life moments and altering their consciousness within virtual worlds.

How do educators deal with this **revolution of place, time and imagination?** How do we capture their full imagination and attention within our learning environments?

We have slowly begun to realize that the industrial model of education is not working! A new way of being human has been let lose in the world! Marshall McLuhan was right! **“We shape our technologies and our technologies shape us!”** What does it mean to be human in a digital civilization? Is the film the **Matrix** a reality or simply a science fiction narrative? As we observe and study the emergence of human androids, or robots, in primary education (Japan and Korea), we cannot ignore something radically new is appearing over the horizon. Within our Catholic context we have to ask, **“Is there a need for a new Catholic Theological Anthropology that speaks to our situation?”** My response is “yes”! It is more urgent than ever before for educators and those in

ministry to delve deeply into this question if we are to creatively address the impact of the evolution of the digital civilization upon us. How do we communicate faith within this context that stimulates the religious imagination **to acknowledge the presence of a merciful, compassionate and loving God** in a virtual or digital culture (civilization)?

We may look around our learning environments and experience the vacuum of digital resources that are available. We may struggle with the barest of digital technology tools, or the consistency of electrical power to sustain them. Educators must **move forward together** defining a **vision and collaboratively working across and within the nation** to ensure that a quality of excellence is woven into every level and space of the **fabric of our educational system in the nation. This is not negotiable!**

Even though a rapidly growing social media network is fusing the digital civilization, we still observe the existence of **digital haves and have not's!** We experience Catholic, private, and public schools deprived of the essential digital tools and resources to participate and collaborate within the digital milieu that **offers vast resources of educational wisdom and expertize** to enhance the quality of our learning environments. Fear not!

The digital divide is closing in with quantum speed because of the availability of more affordable and comprehensive mobile digital devices.

Yes, young people are digital natives! They are cyberzens, citizens of a digital civilization. Learning for them is no longer contained within four walls but within new learning environments without borders, without walls. Marshall McLuhan prediction is on target! **“We shape our technologies and then our technologies shape us”!** His words vibrate into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our children have never been more ‘wired’, or, connected to the world with, or without educators in tow!

### **Dimensions Influencing a Change in Perspective**

We are immersed in an **education revolution** across the board. We have to challenge what we have taken for granted and now have to think outside the box. How do we courageously go about navigating into the digital milieu with prophetic vision and influence? Briefly I wish to address a few of the elements of this new reality educator’s face today.

### **The New Learning Ecology**

The new learning ecology calls us to move from **‘learning about’** something to **‘learning to be’** and this is the **crucial distinction** here. It is



all about finding ways for our students to “learn to be” much earlier in their education. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the approach to education was focused on learning-about and creating stocks of knowledge that students might deploy later in life. This approach worked well in a relatively stable and slow changing world where students could expect to use the same set of skills throughout their life. But now life-long learning is imperative – everything is in flux, constant change calling for flexibility, adaptability, just-in-time learning and out-of-the box thinking for creative alternative solutions to life, culture, religion, and spirituality, economic, political and social shifts. *(In light of this fact, today’s graduation is simply crossing the threshold to a dedicated life of professional life long learner for depth and excellence.)*

Textbook companies are no longer calling themselves textbook companies but **Learning Companies**. Textbooks are becoming **software programs** built to deliver a mix of text, videos and digital homework assignments. The ever growing repertoire of E-books is demonstrating libraries are no longer a physical place but are now **in ‘the cloud’!** Educational environments are rapidly becoming **paperless** with learning

centers where iPads, Tablets, or, the like are the essential educational tools.

In light of this fact, a growing trend is the movement from **communities of place** to **communities of interest** can be seen.

**Communities of interest**<sup>v</sup> are not bound by locality but have members (students) all over the world. Technologies have loosened our sense of place and space in a digital age; therefore, creating a vast universe of e-learning **communities of interest**. Students today want to learn and create at the same time. They want to pull content from diverse e-resource sites into use immediately. The notion of “just-in-time learning” means that whenever you need to learn something in order to accomplish a task, you can find out what you need to know; through blogs, YouTube, Ted Talks, MOOCS, Websites, Google and more. <sup>vi</sup>

### **Influence of Expanding Brain (Neuroscience) Research on Education**

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century has been characterized by the development of a new discipline called **neuroscience** which integrates a multiplicity of methods for studying the brain, cognition, and even personality. In “*The*

*Creating Brain: The Neuroscience of Genius*", Nancy C. Andreasen explores how the human brain achieves creative breakthroughs by looking at the roles of genes and environments. She contrasts extraordinary creativity vs. ordinary creativity, the possession of an omnivores vision, and how the value of not having a "standard education", impacts the question of genius and insanity. She indicates that the personality traits that define the creative individual include **openness to experiences, adventuresomeness, rebelliousness**, (*Here I am reminded of Pope Francis' call to young people to 'mess things up'!*) **individualism, sensitivity, playfulness, persistence, curiosity, and simplicity**. (*Imagine for a moment if this definition of the creative individual was a requirement for each hiring position within our Catholic school system!*) This openness to new experience often permits creative people to observe things that others cannot, because they do not wear the blinders of conventionality when they look around them. Openness is accompanied by a tolerance for ambiguity." vii

She points to two fascinating and diverse geniuses of human history. Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti. **Many of the great**

**Renaissance artists came from very unlikely origins.** Nothing was present in either their heredity or their early childhood environment that would predispose them to become creative, or artistic, or inventive. Yet someone identified them as having a natural gift and placed them in an environment that could nurture them. This is what is called the **Medici Effect**.<sup>viii</sup> Put simply, creative people are likely to be more productive and original if they are surrounded by other creative people. This provides an environment in which the creative brain is stimulated to form novel connections and novel ideas. <sup>ix</sup> Is this not what our vocation is as artists? To create the kind of learning environments that nurtures the creative genius that resides in each one of our students?<sup>x</sup>

Further neuroscience study indicates that knowledge is actually organized differently now because of the Internet. Digital natives brains are being re-mapping in light of their intensive and continuous time spent with digital technologies.

Adults born before 1965 grew up in a time when the amount of knowledge was more manageable, when one could start at the beginning of a book and read to the end. So, people growing up in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

read left to right, top to bottom, start to finish. This is not how young people read influenced by the Internet. They read in the form of the letter “F”. They are conditioned by the template or layout of a website where they are spending vast amount of their time. Imagine a webpage! Digital natives read across the top, down the left side and into the center! Their approach is not surface but depth engagement. By this I mean they navigate a page through hyperlinks which summons them deeper and deeper into a single topic, or theme through hundreds of additional inner links.

Black and white pages carry no fascination, if not boredom for the digital native. Their minds are re-wired for kaleidoscope color, movement, immediate exchanges between links of interest and imagination. Because there is too much information, their reading is informed by the enjoyment of discovery. Engaged learners work willingly, instead of by coercion, and approach their assignments as something that matters to them personally

**How does this impact our understanding of teaching and learning not simply tomorrow but today?** It means creating the space to think in

new learning ecological terms requiring educators to: **first**, create learning environments that promote active learning, critical thinking, collaborative learning and knowledge creation; **second**, faculty thinking together (not only within a particular learning community but within the region and nation), for identifying and imagining new collaborative learning and best practices; and, **third**, embracing the discomfort zones that may emerge in times of change. **Here again we are challenged to exercise our vocation as artists!**

Many different roads are being traveled in the global movement into the 21<sup>st</sup> century systems of education. **Developing a successful 21<sup>st</sup> century Catholic education learning ecology requires innovation and imagination.** Innovation hinges on rethinking the rules. If an educator does not use his/her imagination, one's teaching becomes mechanical and dull! Furthermore, we do not change the current learning context by simply giving our educators new ideas.

**Educators must become 21<sup>st</sup> century learners themselves**, learning from **inquiry, design, and collaborative approaches** that build strong professional learning communities. We are witnessing professional

learning communities (PLC) sprouting up in every educational environment that has placed 21<sup>st</sup> century learning as the grounding principle for excellence. They invent new learning ecologies (environments) inclusive of physical buildings, classroom schedules, technical infrastructure, ongoing professional community of teachers, school (Catholic) culture, community involvement, leadership and these need to be supported at every level of our educational system within the nation. **This is a non-negotiable for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

## **The Challenge**

### **Living in a Culture of Distraction: In Search for the Experience of Great Mystery**

A few weeks ago I had dinner with my Chaminade Scholar students. The conversation migrated to the impact Facebook, Tweeting, Google Hangouts and blog time, etc. is having on both their academic and personal lives. One student explained: “The reality is I am living in a culture of constant distraction! I need some space! I need more time ‘to be’, ‘to contemplate’, and ‘to be silent’!

A good example of the immediacy of this **culture of distraction** is the extent that we and our students suffer from what I call the **vibration reflex syndrome**, or **phantom vibration syndrome**.

While everyone here is supposed to have turned off their iPhones, I am sure there are a good number of you who have your iPhones on vibrate. Perhaps somewhat attentive to this insightful lecture you are now experiencing, you are being distracted if and when your iPhone calls for your immediate attention; thus, distracting your concentration to a message of perceived greater importance. Or, if your iPhone has not vibrated in the past five minutes, you may have looked at it to see if it is 'on', or, the battery has died out. If so, you are suffering from the **vibration reflex syndrome**. Better still, if you think your iPhone is vibrating and it is not, you are suffering from the **phantom vibration syndrome**. Yes, we are distracted! Digital gadgets are consistently buzzing, singing and chanting, how can we learn the value of silence, contemplation and meditation in this world? Robert Henri, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century great American artist wrote: "There is no art without contemplation!" Every minute of our day we may be missing



something or someone of great significance because we are caught in the syndrome, in the culture of distraction! **21<sup>st</sup> century educators call digital natives to discover the meaning and value of contemplation!**<sup>xi</sup>

We spend our time endlessly searching to ensure that we are always connected to a Wi-Fi. The Wi-Fi is our umbilical cord to our existence in the world of instant connectivity, belonging, direction, information and meaning. If only our search for God was as intense and constant as our search for a Wi-Fi!

Fr. Karl Rahner, a leading 20<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit theologian, spoke about the **emergence of an eclipse of mystery** in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. He used the term along with the metaphor of living in a **'wintery season'** when the warmth of the experience of a merciful, compassionate and unconditional loving God seemed to be fading away, **being eclipsed** by the rapidly **evolving cultural distractions** of individualism, relativism, consumerism, technology and secularism not to mention a culture of violence, competition and death.

Early I spoke to you about communities of place and communities of interest. As e-communities of interest are magnified throughout

cyberspace, we realize that, as human beings, we need experiences of **communities of place**, as well. **Community is essential for being and becoming more human.** Community of place is essential for experiencing the meaning, depth and beauty of what it means to be the **People of God.** Community and Communication are rooted together. They are the **bridge, balm and bond** that opens us to a sense of the All Holy and the Sacred, as well as, nurtures inter and intra communities of peace and justice.

The proclamation of the **Catholic Church's Year of Faith** has been a call to address the experiences I am now sharing with you. Amidst a culture of distraction, an eclipse of the Great Mystery, women and men of faith, particularly Catholic educators, are called to rediscover our direction, **or GPS**, toward a new awakening of God in our lives. We are to reinvigorate, arouse and transform our consciousness to a sense of the sacred and holy in a growing secular world. We are, as Pope Francis states: **'to keep the memory of a living God alive'**<sup>xiii</sup> through our very presence in our schools, neighborhoods, communities and

world. The memory of God is not a textbook, or museum memory but a living memory, of a living God.

Within each one of us is the spark of the Divine! We are created in the image and likeness of God! We are created to continue the creative work of God in our world! We are to rediscover the Joy of believing and the enthusiasm for communicating faith<sup>xiii</sup> in a digital culture (civilization). **We are co-creators! We are artists!**

## Conclusion

I believe Pope Francis' reference to the **pilgrim's rule** is a guide for how we are to walk with those we engage in our new learning (ecology) communities into the future. He says: "**The Pilgrim's rule is that one should not walk too far behind, or, too far ahead but side by side those we serve.**"<sup>xiv</sup> Yet, we should be far enough ahead to call and invite them to keeping moving forward with a sense of hope and promise, far enough behind to ensure that no one gets lost along the way and to be walking side by side with them, encouraging, affirming, challenging, inspiring and setting their hearts aflame for what is good, true and beautiful!

You, our new Graduates, are to bring to the Caribbean educational milieu a **new prophetic stance in light of the rapidly evolving digital culture**. We need to contemplate together the gravity of the question - **What does it mean to be human in a digital civilization?** Catholic educators, in particular, must be prepared, alert and shrewd for tackling and attending to this question within the Catholic cultural context of our Catholic schools. Our Catholic Social Teaching brings much to bear on this question and Catholic educators must be informed and formed by these teachings if our response to the question preserves the rights and dignity of the human person in a digital civilization. This is not an option for a few! Each one of us in this hall has a moral and ethical responsibility to engage in the conversation. We need to discern a fresh, new meaning and understanding for defining our Catholic Theological Anthropology in the face of technology's influence and implantations within the human person.

<sup>xv</sup>How do we, as Catholics, hold sacred the meaning of respect and dignity of persons pressured by the advancements I have attempted to highlight in my address?

Our vocation, as artists, is to bring about a counter cultural perspective that demonstrates that truth, goodness and beauty are values worthy of being reflected within every student's life as they navigate through cyberspace? This means we are called to mentor our students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the digital world. How else can a culture of peace and justice emerge unless we have a sense of these transcendental values that radiate through every fiber of the tapestry of our learning communities.

During one of his World Youth Day (2013) homilies Pope Francis said: "Listen! Young people are the window through which the future enters the world! They are the window and so they present us with great challenges and opportunities!" <sup>xvi</sup>

**Being an educator is one of the most significant callings, vocations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!** Ours is a holy vocation! It is a gift to enter one another's lives with gratitude by awakening, inspiring and mentoring each one to **'create a masterpiece with their lives'**. **Yes, we are artists!** The legacy we leave behind for our children, our children's children and great grandchildren is whether we were faithful in, to and through our vocation

to ‘**spark into flame**’ wonder and curiosity for becoming fully human in a digital civilization by radiating truth, goodness and beauty in their lives and the world around them!

Returning to Blessed John Paul II’s **Apostolic Letter to Artists**<sup>xvii</sup>, he wrote: “On the threshold of the Third millennium, my hope for all of you who are artists is that you will have an especially intense experience of creative inspiration. May the beauty which you pass on to generations still to come be such that it will stir them to wonder! Faced with the sacredness of life and of the human person, and before the marvels of the universe, wonder is the only appropriate attitude. From this wonder there can come enthusiasm. People of today and tomorrow need this enthusiasm if they are to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Yes, we are artists! Our palette and colors reflect the learning environments and diversity of students who enter our lives. Our brushes are the digital tools and resources that enable us to add, blend and inspire new experiences of innovation for stimulating the imagination and religious imagination of our students. The masterpiece is the potential released within each student to respond faithfully to their vocation in

becoming the person God calls them to be and become throughout their life. **Yes, we are artists of the noblest kind!**

May this be the legacy our children remember! We embraced our vocation passionately as artists! We courageously navigated into the terrain of new learning ecologies and held sacred what it means to be human! We awakened them to a contemplative way of living for experiencing the one Great Mystery of our Being – God! **Yes, may this be our legacy! Amen!**

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<sup>ii</sup> Pope John Paul II. Letter to Artists. Vatican City. 1999.

<sup>iii</sup> In 2008 the Caribbean School for Catholic Communications (CSCC) Coordinating Team observed that more and more of the students were coming to the CSCC with state of the art digital resources for communications and production. By 2012, it was obvious the entire CSCC needed to shift the learning environment, roles of instructors and desired outcomes of learning in order to prepare students to be prepared to engage in effective digital communications ministry in their parishes, or dioceses. In 2013, a pilot flip was implemented with great success. The new digital formation program will be implemented in August 2014.

<sup>iii</sup> The industrial age mode of teaching and learning reference to the traditional role of the teacher as the sage on the stage. Students sitting in desks, in rows and teachers lecturing primarily from a textbook. Memorization and studying to the precise test of basic knowledge geared to hold a job. The educational process was to prepare children to enter into the factories and industries. In most situations knowledge was standard, basic and learning more passive than active.

<sup>iv</sup> Examples are: Nick D'Aloisio (17) creator *Summly App*, or, Mark Zuckerberg (19) creator of Facebook

<sup>v</sup> Examples are the growing numbers on Facebook, Tumblr, Tweeting, Blogs and other virtual gathering sites that continue to multiple per minute.

<sup>vi</sup> Another example is the rapid expansion of available online learning courses, seminars, TED talks, etc.

<sup>vii</sup> Andreasen, Nancy. **The Creating Brain: The Neuroscience of Genius**. Bana Press. Washington, D.C. 2005. Pps 30-31

<sup>viii</sup> Named after the Medici Family, particularly Lorenzo Medici, who stimulated a burst of creativity in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence, Italy. The Medici Effect means that one steps into an intersection of fields, disciplines, or cultures to combine existing concepts into a large number of extraordinary ideas.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid. p 128

<sup>x</sup> Ibid. p. 115

<sup>xi</sup> Recently while giving talks in the Diocese of Hamilton, Ontario, I was introduced to a new initiative originated in the Diocese of Townsville, Australia (see <http://www.tsv.catholic.edu.au/> to guide elementary children to learn and practice contemplation in their daily life. The initiative is now woven into the fabric of every single Catholic school within the diocese.

<sup>xii</sup> Pope Francis' **Homily to Catechists**. September 2013



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<sup>xiii</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. October 11, 2012. **Proclamation of the Year of Faith**

<sup>xiv</sup> Pope Francis' Address to the Pontifical Council of Social Communications. September 2013

<sup>xv</sup> (This is where ongoing collaborative dialogue between and among Catholic educators, theologians, Church leaders and ministers needs to be woven into our diocesan and Episcopal Conference structures. This dialogue is not limited to a few but 'all'. It needs to be an inclusive dialogue. It is one that needs to be inclusive of the digital cultural designers, as well!)

<sup>xvi</sup> Check for 'exact' reference.

<sup>xvii</sup> Pope John Paul II: **Apostolic Letter to Artists**. Vatican City 1999.

<sup>xviii</sup> Pope John Paul II: **Apostolic Letter to Artists**. Vatican City. 1999

## The Author

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She was the International President of UNDA World (Catholic Communications - Radio and TV 1994 - 2002). She served as a member of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (Vatican City 1994 - 2002).

She specializes in the adult faith formation with special attention to the impact of emerging new technologies in the formation of a new digital culture/civilization with a specialization in distance learning.

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