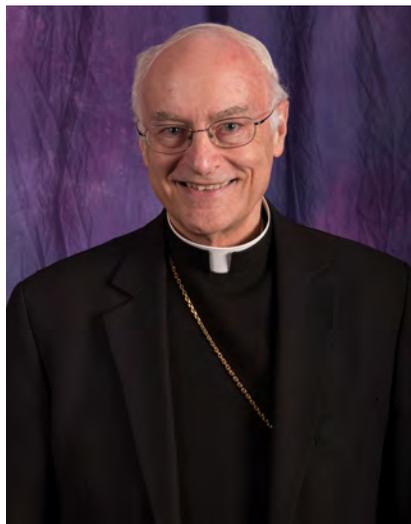


## Thoughts on Catholic and Vincentian Education



*The Most Rev. Raymond F. Chappetto, D.D., V.G., V.E., '67, received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters for his remarkable career as a leader in the Catholic Church during Niagara University's Vincentian Heritage Convocation, Sept. 25, 2014. Bishop Chappetto studied philosophy at Niagara University and the Our Lady of Angels Seminary in Albany, where he earned a master of divinity degree. He would later add a master's degree in religious education from St. John's University, as well as a certification in pastoral counseling. Bishop Chappetto was appointed a Prelate of Honor by Blessed John Paul II in 1997. In 1999, he became pastor of Our Lady of the Snows in Floral Park. The National Catholic Education Association named him "Pastor of the Year" in 2008. By April of 2012, he had been appointed pastor of St. Kevin Church in Flushing. His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, appointed Bishop Chappetto as Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of Brooklyn in May 2012. He was formally ordained to the episcopacy on July 11, 2012. By September of the following year, he had taken on the role of Vicar General of the Diocese of Brooklyn.*

*The full transcript from his keynote address is below.*

**T**hank you for your very warm welcome to Niagara University. Congratulations to my fellow honorees. If one of us is honored, all of us are honored. It is a joy and a privilege to be here with you on this beautiful day. When I left New York City earlier I knew what was happening in three of the boroughs: in Manhattan – the United Nations causing a traffic jam; in the Bronx – Derek Jeter fever; and in Queens, the New York State Catholic Conference of Bishops' Meeting. Bishop Richard Malone, your bishop, sends his fondest regards and deepest admiration.

In my talk today I would like to share with you my experience of Catholic Education and Vincentian Education and also some convictions I have about Catholic Education. Memories of my early childhood are happy ones. The middle of five sons born to Catholic parents, I was deeply immersed in all things Catholic from the very beginning. Living on the same street as the local Catholic parish (Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Astoria, N.Y.) provided easy access to the church and its thriving Catholic school and its religious education program. The Catholic school did not have a kindergarten, so the adventure began in first grade where I joined 1,600 other children whose parents took advantage of a wonderful opportunity to build on a faith life that began in the home.

Staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood and two lay teachers, we received the fundamental and foundational training for life and for the faith that would shape us and mold us for the future that we faced. The sweet and gentle kindness of a first-grade sister, just beginning her teaching career, made a lasting impression. How she managed to teach 70 first graders at the same time still remains a great mystery. The sisters knew how to control us and at the same time to impart wisdom, lessons, and Catholic teachings that left lasting impressions.

Forty-five years after graduating from this wonderful Catholic institution, we had a class reunion in 2004. The memories, once again, came alive. The teachers' names were still alive in our memories and their goodness was still palpable and remained so much a part of our conversation. The Catholic culture was imparted to us and we loved every minute of every day. No one who experienced a Catholic school education in the 1950s can say that they did not learn their faith ...yes, we memorized the answers to the Catechism questions, but we also knew the faith. It was a faith that centered on the Sunday Mass – where the sisters were there to greet us and pray with us. It was a faith that was centered on the sacraments which we understood and loved. It was a faith that we tried to

live out in our desire to help the poor and support those in the missions – to bring this very same faith to other boys and girls we would never meet!

The faith that we were taught in our religion

lessons was reenforced at home. Conversations at the dinner table often reflected the instruction given at school that day. Praying the Rosary after dinner, as a family, gave us a deeper prayer life that we knew was so important. The sisters, the parish priests, our parents, our Catholic neighbors and friends seemed to be in harmony with one another: all working toward the same goal, which was to produce young Catholic boys and girls whose formation would serve the Church and the world for generations to come.

When choices of high school were presented, I felt drawn toward the diocesan high school minor seminary (Cathedral Prep in Brooklyn, N.Y.). Needless to say, the Catholic environment (school, parish, and home) that had fostered growth in those early years now supported me in my next endeavor. The high school seminary system enabled me to still live at home and travel each day to attend a six-year program (four years of high school and the first two years of college) run by diocesan priests and once again two lay teachers! Of course, as expected, the education we received as minor seminarians was rooted in the teaching of the Catholic faith, but now we began to think on our own. There was an open-mindedness on the part of the priest religion teachers to the teenage minds beginning to ask questions and seek a deeper meaning. The rote memory of the earlier years was not in use any longer. The exposure to current Catholic thinking was a welcome gift to our inquiring but confused teenage minds.

After graduating from Cathedral Prep in 1965, I was assigned to Our Lady of Angels Seminary in Albany. Let me say that attending this seminary was one of the best things that ever happened to me in my entire life.

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Leaving home was a rite of passage – an experience that helped me to grow up fast. As I entered the seminary, I realized it was a unique and special place. The Vincentian Fathers had been running seminaries for so many

years. They really knew what they were doing. They were wonderful teachers, good priests, and great role models. How appropriate as we celebrate Vincentian Heritage that we remember one of the many legacies of St. Vincent: seminary education! Just as St. Vincent de Paul advanced the education and the formation of the clergy in France – so also these priests on the faculty of Our Lady of Angels Seminary in Albany, formerly located right here on this campus, provided us with not only a quality education, but also with the pastoral tools we would need to function as priests in a church trying to implement the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. The older priests on the faculty:

- Fr. John Young – was a great canon lawyer and church historian
- Fr. Joseph Kennedy – had been a missionary in China
- Fr. Joaquin Garcia – taught us about poverty and its root causes
- Fr. Fred Russell – told us always to keep our feet on the ground

And then there were some younger priests like:

- Fr. Tom Hoar – taught us that learning could be fun – his joyful spirit was contagious
- Fr. Jim Smith – taught us Latin and Liturgy – I recently attended his funeral at St. John's University
- Fr. Jack O'Grady – was a very well-organized teacher

And the unforgettable faculty members:

- Fr. Phil Dion – a great theologian
- Fr. Jack Conway – a very good spiritual director

- Fr. Steve Trzeciecki – organized the pastoral service component of the Seminary and would later be the founder of the Vincentian Renewal Institute at Princeton where I made several retreats

I am sure I have not mentioned them all. Most are looking down from heaven upon us. I was fortunate to be able to make many visits to the cemetery in Princeton where they are buried to honor their memory. I mention these names so that the Vincentian Fathers here at Niagara know of my appreciation and affection for the Vincentian education and formation I received from the faculty at Our Lady of Angels. By the way, it was a beautiful seminary and it is so sad that the declining enrollment forced it to close in 1972, only 11 years after it was built! Vincentian seminary education taught us to be flexible in the sense that the courses were adaptable to the changing times. Vincentian seminary education taught us to be pastoral in the sense that our apostolic assignments were taken seriously. Vincentian seminary education taught us to be responsive to the needs of the poor – not just physical poverty but the spiritually poor as well.

Although the seminary was an interdiocesan seminary (there were 16 different dioceses represented) many of the faculty originally came from Brooklyn, the diocese of my birth and ministerial service. Those priests, in particular, knew what we would be facing after ordination and did their very best to prepare us for the priesthood. The seminary in Albany kept its affiliation with Niagara University and all our degrees – Bachelor of Arts and Masters of Divinity – bore the seal of this university and were signed by its president. How awesome it is that today for the very first time, I am on the campus of the university for which I hold several degrees! I had always wondered if I would ever have an opportunity to see this campus. Today is a dream come true! Being able to reconnect with Brother Martin, who was on the faculty at the

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seminary in Albany, and to meet all of you makes this day so very special.

In every parish I have been assigned, there has always been a Catholic grade school. I consider this a blessing. However, I have always tried very hard not to, in any way, neglect the needs of the public school children who come for religious education classes. (Sometimes these children are treated as second-class citizens. This is a tragedy and needs to be corrected.)

From my earliest days in the priesthood, I have been welcomed in the Catholic school and religious education classrooms during religion lessons or at other times as well. I often wonder if God had not called me to be one of His priests, if He may have called me to be a teacher in a Catholic school. Inspired by all the teachers I have had, I love standing in front of a class full of young people, letting them ask questions, trying to make a connection between religion and life, and imparting to them the truths of our beloved Catholic faith. As a priest, I have been able to continue to teach the young how to pray, the importance of the Sacraments (especially the Holy Eucharist), and the Catholic culture that is so much a part of my life. Tomorrow morning I will be in the eighth grade class at St. Kevin Parish and on Wednesday evening with the eighth grade Religious Education at St. Kevin Parish.

After three and a half years of parish ministry, I realized I needed more training and more knowledge if I was to become a truly effective parish priest. I then turned to another Vincentian-run institution – St. John’s University – I enrolled in a master’s degree program and began a wonderful experience – and had perhaps one of those life-changing experiences. It happened when I met Father John McKenna who, ironically, had been assigned to Our Lady of Angels Seminary in Albany from 1971-1972 – the year that I was not there and the year that the seminary closed. Father John Freund, here

today, was also on the faculty that same year. Father Jack McKenna was, without a doubt, the best teacher I have had in my life. He knew his material, he loved his material, and he taught it in a way that showed that love. Some would say that I majored in McKennaism while studying at St. John's University. Taking courses with him on liturgy, sacraments, in particular, the Holy Eucharist profoundly changed me and my understanding of being a priest.

Respectful of his students, he demanded the best from us. He challenged me to enter deeply into theological studies in a way that I could not do as a seminarian because I lacked pastoral experience. So as I learned the application of theology to my experience as a parish priest, I began to know and love the priesthood even more than I already did at that point of my life.

Father Jack McKenna was really organized; from day one you knew what was expected. I really looked forward to being with him in class. He taught us about something new that was just beginning in the Church. He called it the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). He said it would become the normative way for adults to enter the Church. He said it would be here to stay. (Forty years later, we are still discovering its beauty and realizing its benefits for our Church.) He was right about that one! We were priests, religious brothers and sisters, and lay people in his class as we sat mesmerized by this wonderful scholar and devoted Vincentian priest – week after week – as he lectured and engaged us in discovering the beauty of our faith.

Recently, when he died, I was able to attend his funeral at the Church of St. Thomas More on the campus of St. John's University where he spent so many years teaching so many students. I appreciate the legacy he left on the Vincentian Community who knew him and worked with him and who can attest to his profound effect on the people who were privileged to know

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Jack McKenna. And so, attending the Vincentian-run university of St. John's exposed me to life on a college campus – including how to register and pay for courses, how to balance going back to school and still working

in a parish – and most of all to appreciate the gift of our faith and instilled in me the desire to share that faith.

During my graduate school program I attempted to deepen my own love for the truth of our Catholic faith and search for ways to make the teaching of religion a positive and creative experience for the children and adults whom I was privileged to serve. To this current generation of Catholics seeking to be educated in our faith, every effort must be made to use all the technology available. Religion teachers and catechists have as one of their main tasks: to teach the faith in a way their audience can best grasp the message. Technology is not an optional method. It must be used and used well to communicate the faith.

After becoming a pastor, I realized that my responsibilities would then become even more focused on the continuation of Catholic education. Now, I would be involved in the management tasks that a pastor inherits along with the gift of a Catholic grade school. Working closely with many competent principals through the years, I discovered the importance of a balanced budget for the school! I learned even more intensely of the deep love of our Catholic school teachers for the children entrusted to their care. I came to know the sacrifice that these teachers make and their tremendous dedication. As a pastor, I realized the challenge presented to me (both on the parish and school level) was to not let the administrative duties inhibit me from being with the people, in particular the students.

Teaching the children and visiting the classroom has nourished my priesthood these many years. The gift of our faith is a gift to be shared. A priest is in a unique

position to be able to share his personal vocation story with young people who are eager to listen. Perhaps our vocation shortage situation may one day be reversed if we priests will plant the seed of a religious vocation in the minds and hearts of the young people of our parishes, schools, and catechetical programs.

Now, allow me to conclude my reflection by sharing an insight from God's latest challenge to me. Being an auxiliary bishop these last two years has prevented me from doing as much "classroom visitation" as in the past. But, I am learning the new way in which God is calling me to promote and support Catholic education. In the Brooklyn Diocese, where I serve, we are in the process of changing the administration of our schools to an academy model. Simply put, our wonderful Catholic laity is stepping up to assume leadership roles in the governance of our schools. One of my main tasks now is to support this time of transition by encouraging our Diocesan Education Office employees, by visiting our newly formed academies, by being present during Catholic Schools Week and by helping to advocate for tuition tax credits. Last year, when we held the Annual Catholics at the Capital Day in Albany, we were very strongly advocating for the passage of a bill that would allow for

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tuition tax credits. We came closer than ever before in this effort. We are going to again intensify our efforts to get this legislation passed. Please, as an academic community – here at Niagara – please join us in this effort. Let your voice be heard. (Ten Catholic schools closed recently here in Buffalo.) My grade school is closed, my preparatory seminary is closed, my major seminary is closed – a great loss. I don't have a school to which I can return.

Today, our parents need help if they are to afford the cost of sending their children to Catholic schools. My own parents did not have to pay tuition for me and my brothers to attend our Catholic grade school. I want to do my small part now to ensure that Catholic school education remains available. Being a product of Catholic Education and Vincentian Catholic Education, I want others to know and experience that Catholic education is a great way to transmit the faith.

I am well aware that the landscape has changed, the Church has changed, the world has changed. However, I submit to you the conviction I have and the hope many of you share as well – that the Catholic education system is an experience, a gift, a treasure worth preserving.