



CATHOLIC CHARITIES
of St. Paul and Minneapolis

Creating Our Commons Through Collective Courage
Humphrey School of Public Affairs: All Class Reunion

Remarks of Tim Marx, Chief Executive Officer
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All people are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This civic creed launched our Nation.

Its promise of temporal and spiritual abundance inspires.

It brought me to the Humphrey and to graduate, 30 years ago, in 1983:

- The year my oldest son was born—and his happiness and life chances were paramount, notwithstanding our inability to make him smile for a forced family fun photo!
- I knew that my son, although endowed with the same rights as others, was already ahead of most and behind some, simply based on the circumstances into which he was born and the color of his skin.
- A Reagan Administration report was released the month my son was born. It lamented a “Nation at Risk”—with our preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and innovation overtaken... stating that if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose such mediocre performance, we might have viewed it as an act of war. The focus was education but it cut much more broadly.

Now, 30 years later, here is what I see:

- A recent study of the OECD—whose members are the world’s 22 richest countries—rank the average literacy score for United States 16 to 24 year olds as 20th out of 22—20 out of 22.
- Minnesota has the worst graduation rate in the nation for Hispanics; and the second worst for blacks. Almost half the class from Minneapolis Public Schools failed to graduate on time in 2012. While 70 percent of Asian and white students graduated, only 37 percent of Latino and black students did.
- There have been two self-imposed state government shut-downs, the last two years ago; and two self-imposed federal government shut-downs, one ended not even two weeks ago.

We are a “Nation more at Risk”, more at risk, than 30 years ago. Think about the lost opportunity of these 30 years; the human tragedy and community toll of leaving large portions of a generation behind.

Now, you can’t go to a school named Humphrey and not have hope and optimism—and there is much reason for hope. So let’s focus on the next 30 years, and the opportunity set before us to do much better.

I have the good fortune to help lead the largest comprehensive social service agency in the Greater Mpls/St. Paul region—Catholic Charities, which serves anyone regardless of faith, background, or personal circumstance. Humphrey spoke to a core belief of Catholic Charities—“that our moral test is how we treat those in the dawn of life, our children; those in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows, the sick, needy and handicapped.”

Catholic Charities’ principle challenge today is serving too many people in crisis; those left behind in the last 30 years and many others—by just keeping them alive with a mat on which to sleep and a meal to get them to the next day. We won’t stop doing this, but we want to move beyond mats and meals and do better at preventing people from showing up or having to come back. We’re not alone—our collective antipoverty strategy relies too much on costly crisis services with too few long-term benefits.

We’ve concluded that “we can’t serve our way out of poverty”—“we can’t serve our way out of poverty.” Reliance on homeless shelters and meals alone will just require more of the same. Catholic Charities, and the community, is trapped in a crisis bell curve. We want to work with the community to flatten the curve by preventing poverty and solving it.

To do this we need a new civic compact, a transformative new commons that allows us to move beyond lurching from one tragic crisis to the next, and demands that all of us adjust our priorities—not sacrifice our principles—to resolve our most urgent challenges.

No white paper or commission can create this commons. It will require undaunted courage and leadership—everyone thinking and acting anew—stretching the comfort zones of boards of directors, voters, customers, shareholders, politicians, business, labor, the academy, you name it.

We must move beyond “either/or” to “both/and”:

- No more to social equity or jobs and economic growth; to achieve either, both are necessary;
- No more to “we just need better teachers” or “we must solve poverty first” to close the achievement gap; both are imperative.
- No more focus on individual “moral failure” as a cause of persistent poverty, or to denying the importance of accountability; a society that fosters dignity inspires personal responsibility.

At Catholic Charities we had a recent “stretch our comfort zone” moment.

You remember the ballot initiative of 2012?—I am referring to the Voter ID Initiative. Whether it passed or not had no direct impact on the services we deliver, and it had significant initial public support. Involvement risked criticism of being partisan, when we are fiercely nonpartisan. Yet the commons we want to inspire—is everyone’s—everyone’s.

We sought a “both/and” compromise with proponents before it got on the ballot, but when it was put on the ballot we had to choose, and we chose to fight it.

We had to do some “explaining” to donors and others. But it worked. People listened. We worked in partnership with our Lutheran Social Service friends and many others, and we preserved the rights of many to help build our new commons.

There will be other “comfort zone” tests. For example, the increasing wealth and income gaps, and decreasing social and economic mobility, are tearing this country apart.

When the *Economist magazine* expresses concern and devotes an entire issue to this, as they did a year ago, we can have confidence that we are not involved in a Marxist plot.

Catholic Charities has always, and always must, engage on these issues. Our tradition suggests raising the minimum wage as high as possible as a principal solution. But what about what economists and business say about the impact on employment, particularly for low-skilled workers? What about alternatives like tax credits, wage subsidies, and many others?

If we believe in moving from “either/or” to “both/and” in a new commons, Catholic Charities must be prepared to challenge our traditional approaches, as we ask others to do the same.

After 30 years of a public affairs career, I recognize that I might not have 30 more years of career left in me. This has inspired a sense of urgency.

If we work hard and together, lead with courage, take risks—using the skills and strategies learned at the Humphrey—my oldest son born 30 years ago into a Nation at Risk, now a family man himself will have a baby, my grandchild, who can come of age, with many others, in a nation that offers the rewards of opportunity for everyone, in the commons our Civic Creed calls for.

We have a vision within our reach: a community with poverty for no one and opportunity for everyone. It has been said you are “not a realist unless you believe in miracles”. Let’s be realists. Together, today, let’s take that first step. Believe....*Believe.*