



March 31, 2014
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In this issue:

The Kindling for the Fire is the Will

Leadership as Conversion
to God's Will



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Leadership as Conversion to God's Will

By Patrick O'Meara and Patrick J. McCloskey

An Interview with Mike Dewan, President Emeritus of the St. Catherine of Siena Academy Foundation, Wixom, MI

In 2010, the impossible happened. St. Catherine of Siena Academy, an all-girls Catholic high school, opened in a temporary facility in the Archdiocese of Detroit despite the Great Recession, which was worse in the metropolitan area than anywhere else nationwide. Two years later, the students and faculty moved into a new \$30-million facility. St. Catherine's was started not by a religious congregation or a diocese, as most Catholic schools, but with the promise a lay leader, Mike Dewan, made to his wife. It was to be a new school without alumni to tap for support or a dollar in the bank. There was no big donor to jumpstart the process and no certainty the Archdiocese would approve the school. In other dioceses, bishops were shying away from new projects since they were closing existing Catholic schools at an alarming pace.

From a practical viewpoint, this project was not realistic. But reality, as Dewan learned in very acute ways, has material and spiritual dimensions, and God's grace is a powerful force that can be invoked to transform human affairs. That might seem axiomatic for Christians but often obstacles undermine persistence. Not so for Dewan. "God's grace abounds more with greater difficulties," he related in a telephone interview. "God won't let his ship sink, but he is relying on us to have an oar in the water and to keep pulling, and to pull together."

The key to Dewan's success was a sustained act of individual and group will—"never giving up," which he learned from his parents and was reinforced at Catholic school—that through ardent prayer, yielded to the greater will of God and overcame what was otherwise insurmountable.

"He allowed me to dance around his hand for many years when I was young," Dewan

related, "but once I placed my life in his hand, he wouldn't let go. There has to be a realignment of wills, and depending on the person this can be an exciting or a painful process. Like me, some people achieve material success and then get so full of themselves, they become their own gods."

In 1985, Dewan graduated from Detroit Catholic Central High School (DCCHS), which had moved from the City of Detroit to a nearby suburb seven years earlier. After finishing college four years later, the job market was weak so he started a business with high school classmate Ed Turek. This venture developed into Degue LLC, a business investment holding company that today is comprised of two rubber-recycling operations and an advancement consulting firm for schools and business. Both men married and achieved enough success to comfortably support large families. Dewan currently has seven children and Ed has five youngsters.

Fifteen years before, as their families started to grow, Dewan, Turek and their wives still found time to become involved in parish projects. Then in 1997, because of Dewan's business and management acumen, he was asked to manage the relocation of his parish church and school in order to double the parish's physical capacity and expand its programs.

Shortly after the parish relocation in 2001, Dewan got a call from Turek who was involved in advancement at their alma mater. Dewan then met with Fr. Richard Elmer CSB, the school's president, who asked him to oversee DCCHS's relocation. On one hand, "for me it was more than a coincidence that I was asked to work on two relocations back to back," Dewan remarked. "God was using the parish project to prepare for the next one." On the other hand, "my wife and I had just spent four years fundraising, then standing in the dirt at the construction site, moving playground equipment, then outfitting classrooms, and at countless construction and parish meetings. This took three nights a week, every



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weekend, and whatever time we could spare during day."

Knowing that the DCCHS relocation, which involved building a new campus for a projected \$35 million would impose greater demands, Dewan was far from certain his wife would give her blessing. She did so, with one condition: "whatever you do for the boys you have to do for the girls."

DCCHS is an all-boys secondary school, and when Dewan committed to his wife's condition, he was promising to building an all-girls high school. As well, the "you" included Fr. Elmer who agreed to take on the girls' school as soon as DCCHS's new campus was completed.

In 2002, a year into the planning the new DCCHS, the U.S. economy started to falter. At a meeting of major donors and other board members, the majority of stakeholders spoke nervously about the economy, recommending that breaking ground be delayed for a year or two. With rising oil prices, American automakers slipped into crisis and this reverberated through all business sectors around Detroit.

"I looked across the table at Fr. Elmer and I could see his heart sinking. He was already 76 years old," Dewan recalled. "I told everyone, 'It's not time to wait but to go. Either we trust God is with us or we don't.' Then I explained that a sour economy would offer a lot of opportunities to save money in lower costs for materials, supplies and labor."

The board voted to go ahead and despite the worsening economy, we finished constructing the school on time in 2005 and under budget. In fact, enough money was saved to build a football stadium. The savings were so substantial because Dewan's management philosophy included what he termed "gift assessment," that is, matching tasks with what people do best. Fr. Elmer asked him to function as the owner's representative. Dewan responded that he was qualified to handle negotiations with

contractors for a \$10-million project, but a \$30-million project would best be served by hiring a top professional. Although this involved an additional expense upfront, the net savings totaled \$3.2 million.

In the fall of 2005, Dewan's biggest test was about to start. DCCHS had 11,000 alumni to call on for support and expertise helped. The girls' school wouldn't admit its first student until 2010 and begin enrolling large numbers of students until the new building opened in 2012. That seven-year journey was a classic tale of "if it can go wrong, it will."

At first a religious order of Sisters agreed to administer the school and chose the school's name. A local businessman offered to donate land, valued at \$20 million, on which to build the school. But then the recession hit, which delayed fundraising efforts, and when the donor experienced financial difficulty, he had to withdraw the property. Finally in 2010, enough financial factors were in place to go the bond market to raise the \$30 million needed to complete the girls' school. Then the bond market failed and several months later, when the bond market become hospitable, the City of Novi refused to approve the project. Another building site needed to be found in another city, and the likelihood of even building the school seemed to dim. The Sisters left the project, but the school's name remained and appropriately so, since St. Catherine of Siena was a layperson just as almost everyone involved in building and now running the school.

As each challenge emerged, Dewan told his core group of volunteers, which included Turek and Fr. Elmer, "we are not going to give up. We are going to pray and keep going." Dewan's persistence was not merely a personality trait but became an instrument of God's will through developing what he described as "a hardened life of prayer."

"When I first became involved in parish projects, I was a lukewarm Catholic," Dewan related. "I would say a prayer at the beginning of meetings with everyone else.



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Then with the St. Catherine's project, we started to pray more because it was obvious that only God could bring us through the crises."

"Years ago as a young man, I was a very proud. Sometimes a bit of success in life opens that door," recalled Dewan. "But these projects crush pride because you find yourself so inept and so needy that there is nowhere else to reach but up to God. Without prayer and the Eucharist, there's no way I could play my role. Now, if I don't get to daily mass, I can be an ass. Something is missing and those days are more difficult."

Dewan shares this key to leadership with John Calipari, the head basketball coach at the University of Kentucky. In a recent New York Times article about how Calipari deals with his players as they win games in this year's NCAA tournament, it is also reported that the coach attends daily Mass.

"I began to pray the rosary more fervently, read scripture regularly and I started to talk to people about God," Dewan said. "The more my prayer life grew, the more I wanted the Lord to be in the conversation in all aspects of my life. I've come to the conclusion he is there anyway. He's at the meetings, at the construction site, so we might as well bring him in."

Dewan described how this "freaked" some people out, but "most have a hunger for the Lord and I watched how our faith lives grew." For the most part, Dewan led the volunteers in praying for "the Lord to please send us the people who can help us with what we weren't good at." This led to establishing a network of highly accomplished lawyers, finance experts and other professionals Dewan called on to file articles of incorporation, navigate the complexities of bond financing and so on.

Dewan's deepest insight into leadership was the clear perception that God's projects are works of conversion on two levels. First, building a school has an obvious value, in this case since there was no similar alternative for girls in the area. For decades to come, the school will serve as a vehicle of evangelization for succeeding generations of young women.

Secondly, for the people involved in bringing the goal to fruition, the inherent challenges in turn challenge each individual to make room for God and to deepen spiritual connections with the Lord and each other.

Dewan related how different his vision of his life was as a young man to what he learned God wanted, which was to be in "a healthy, holy marriage surrounded by loving children." At issue as he took on Church projects was his love of golf. Dewan belonged to two country clubs and traveled often to play at courses around the country. But that hobby took most of his free time and considerable resources.

"I can't remember the last time I played golf," he said with a laugh. "But God has a sense of humor. My oldest son attends Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina on a golf scholarship."

Dewan recalled his days as a student at DCCHS where "sports taught us Catholics to be very competitive. We learned to play to win and never quit. Add to that the gasoline of the Holy Spirit and there is no excuse not to see projects through."

At the end of May, St. Catherine of Siena Academy will graduate its first senior class of 10 girls. Next fall, the incoming freshman class will number between 75 and 100, about halfway to maximum size.