

**Homily for Mass with the Quincy Catholic Schools  
In Celebration of Catholic Schools Week  
Quincy Notre Dame High School, Quincy**

**The Memorial of Saint Thomas Aquinas  
January 28, 2013**

**+Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My brother priests and deacons, consecrated women, honored guests, dear principals and teachers, staff and volunteers, parents and students, it is good to be among you again to celebrate Catholic Schools Week.

It is fitting that today's Mass honors St. Thomas Aquinas. It is fitting because St. Thomas Aquinas was one of the smartest people who ever lived. His writings about God, which we call theology, are still widely used more than seven hundred years after he died. It is good that we pray for St. Thomas Aquinas to intercede with Almighty God to send His blessings upon our Quincy Catholic Schools to strengthen them as places of learning more about the Catholic faith and how to put that faith into practice.

In today's first reading, we heard Saint Paul encourage us to "attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature to manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). This means that we must seek to renew our relationship with Jesus Christ, to

encounter him frequently in the Eucharist and in the Sacrament of Penance, doing so in such a way that our presence at Sunday Mass and the confessing of our sins is done out of love.

We do not accept the notion of “good enough” in our athletic or academic pursuits. No employer seeks employees who only want to be “good enough.” They want people who are exceptional. Why, then, do we so often allow ourselves to settle for being “good enough” when it comes to the practice of the faith? Jesus is not calling us to mediocrity; he is calling us to be saints.

So it is that in this Year of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI echoes these words of the Apostle and has called us to grow in our knowledge and understanding of the faith of the Church. This is not a simple invitation to achieve higher grades in religion class, as important as doing well in class is. Being able to answer questions on a test correctly is not enough to be counted as a disciple of Jesus Christ; it is one thing to know *about* Jesus Christ, and another thing altogether to *know* him. Pope Benedict reminds us that “knowing the content to be believed is not sufficient unless the heart, the authentic sacred space within the person, is opened by grace that

allows the eye to see below the surface and to understand that what has been proclaimed is the word of God.”<sup>1</sup>

As important as academic grades are in all of the subjects our students learn - and as well regarded as our Catholic schools are for their academic achievements - the high performance of our students is not the principal purpose of our Catholic schools. We have schools with high academic achievement because we know that the “knowledge of faith opens a door into the fullness of the saving mystery revealed by God.”<sup>2</sup> Everything we learn about the natural world - about math and science and history and art and music and geography and literature - can teach us something about God. This was the great insight of Saint Thomas Aquinas who devoted his life to learning and teaching so that by the grace given him he might “equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12).

It should be a matter of great concern to us that many of our students have not grasped this connection between learning about creation as a means to encounter the Creator and to further a personal relationship with Him. You may have heard the statistic that the second-largest religious group in the United States is non-practicing Catholics. I am sure that many

of us know personally the people and stories behind these numbers. They are our sisters and brothers, our nieces and nephews, our sons and daughters, our neighbors and co-workers. Too many students in our parochial schools graduate from the Catholic school system and, upon graduation, do not enter a church again for many years, if at all. Our Catholic schools, and everyone in them, must seek to hand on the faith through a real and personal encounter with Jesus Christ. If students leave our schools without an experience of the love of God, then we have failed in our mission.

What can we say to reignite in them the fire of faith? What is Christ inspiring us to do to proclaim the faith anew to these lost sheep? How can we raise the standard of God's love? These questions lie at the heart of the Year of Faith. Of this task, the Holy Father wrote: "To rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived, and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this Year."<sup>3</sup> To this end, I would like to propose to a three-fold plan to make the most of this Year of Faith.

First, we must be grateful for the faith we have received, for our encounter with the Lord. Families should strive to make their homes

places where the family prays together, reads the Scriptures together, and is nourished together at Sunday Mass. Families should strive to allow their faith to influence everything they do, rather than reserving their faith only for an hour or so on Sunday.

Second, we must endeavor to understand all the more clearly the faith we profess. If a friend, family member or co-worker asks us a question about the Catholic faith, can we provide an adequate – and correct – answer? We ought to be able to do so.

Third, we must share our faith, not only with our family and friends, but with our co-workers and everyone we meet. As the Holy Father reminds us, “Confessing with the lips indicates in turn that faith implies public testimony and commitment.”<sup>4</sup>

This three-fold plan is the way of discipleship and through it we grow closer in our friendship with Jesus Christ. If we make use of these three steps both in this Catholic Schools Week and in this Year of Faith, to raise the standards of faith, then we must raise above all the standard of the Cross. Each time we lift the Cross high we proclaim the loving mercy of God who calls everyone to himself.

This life-changing proclamation of faith must continuously resound in our schools every day, in every class, and by everyone, not only in words but also in our actions. We must strive to follow the wisdom of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who said, “Whoever wishes to live perfectly should do nothing but disdain what Christ disdained on the cross and desire what He desired, for the cross exemplifies every virtue.”

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 10.