

**Homily for Mass at Father McGivney High School
St John Neumann School - Maryville, IL**

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good to be with you at the beginning of this new academic year at Father McGivney High School. Last year I had the privilege of being here as this school began its inaugural year of Catholic education. I am pleased to see the number of students continuing to grow. You are certainly the only Catholic high school in our diocese, and likely the entire area, that can boast of more than doubling your enrollment in just one year! God-willing, those numbers will continue to grow so that this school might become a model of forming disciples in the tradition of our Catholic faith in the Metro East area.

In the Gospel for today's Mass, we hear Jesus using very strong language against the practices of the scribes and Pharisees. He notices how, on the surface, they seem to be religious, but in reality, are guided by selfish motives and the desire for attention. The word that Christ uses to describe them is 'hypocrite.' Hypocrite comes from a Greek word which basically means 'stage actor.' This is a concept we are all familiar with.

Whether it is a television sitcom, a movie, or a stage production, one of the key elements to the show are the actors. They take on a certain role and attempt to imitate the behavior of that character in every detail, from the way they dress to the way they move and even the way they speak. These actors can be so good at their role that if we were to meet them away from the performance, we would be surprised at just how different they are in real life. I know I was surprised when Daniel Day-Lewis gave his acceptance speech when he received an Oscar award for his portrayal of Abraham Lincoln in the movie *Lincoln*. I was surprised because he spoke with his native British accent, which sounded strange after hearing him in the movie speaking as Abraham Lincoln in a perfect Midwestern American accent! Acting like this can give a positive portrayal, but sometimes acting can also be used in negative way to mask a person's dark side. This negative way is the sense in which the Gospel uses the word 'hypocrite' to describe the scribes and Pharisees. They put on a good act when they are being seen, but the rest of their life is just the opposite.

While it can be easy for us to look in judgment upon these scribes and Pharisees, we are challenged to look at ourselves as well and see whether or not we tend to fall into this type of behavior. Most people have

a tendency to want to be accepted and approved. As a result, we sometimes do or say things which will gain that acceptance, even if that behavior does not reflect our true values or identity. We feel pressure to fit in, whether it be among a group of people or according to an image that our culture presents to us as being acceptable or desirable. That pressure can be so powerful that we can easily give in and play the role of a stage actor, putting on a performance because we think it is what others want to see from us and so gain that acceptance and approval.

It is obvious to us how destructive this can be to our lives. Aside from our doing and saying things we wouldn't otherwise normally do, we are pushing aside our true identity, never really letting others, or ourselves for that matter, experience our true identity as God has so beautifully created us. Many people, especially young people, struggle with their true identity and can feel lost and discouraged because so much of their time is spent living up to an image or expectation that is not who they really are.

What, then, is the solution to overcoming this temptation to conform our lives to who we are not? The answer to this is faith. This may sound simplistic or even generic, but there is wisdom to be found in seeing it as a solution to this problem. Sometimes, we can confuse faith with knowing

information *about* God. While that is important, that is not faith. True faith is not just knowing *about* God, it is actually *knowing* God in the form of a relationship. This is where you as students in a Catholic school have to be very cautious about how it is that you approach the study of the faith. In your other classes, such as math and science, you work to understand how things work, applying equations and formulas to solve problems. Those areas of study focus on objects that you can observe and apply reason to and so reach a conclusion. This, however, is not how we approach studying our faith.

Pope Francis, in his recently-released encyclical on the light of faith, *Lumen Fidei*, says the following: "God cannot be reduced to an object. He is a subject who makes himself known and perceived in an interpersonal relationship."¹ Faith, then, must be focused first and foremost on a person, God, and your relationship with Him. As you continue to grow in that relationship, you will notice how He begins to take on a greater part in your life. You will become more and more convinced of just how much He loves you and wants to be the very center of your lives. You will become more convinced that His teachings lead to a life of true freedom, happiness and joy. You will experience that feeling of acceptance and approval from

Him just the way you are and you will no longer be so concerned about what other people think about you or expect from you. You will begin to live your life according to the way that God wants you to live, according to His unique plan for you and you alone.

As you begin this new academic year, studying new subjects and growing in your knowledge of many topics, never forget the importance of developing and growing in your relationship with God. Allow your study of Him in your theology classes to be more than just information to remember for a test, but let it be an opportunity to know more about Him who loves you and wants to be at the center of your lives. Eagerly welcome the many chances that you have to encounter Him in your reception of the Sacraments, in your reading of the Scriptures, and in your daily time of prayer where you speak to Him and listen to Him speaking to you. From that deepened relationship, you will be better equipped to follow the path He has prepared for you which will lead you to the fullness of relationship with Him in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 36.