

**Homily for Principals' Leadership Conference  
Thursday of the 5<sup>th</sup> Week of Lent  
April 10, 2014**

**Villa Maria Catholic Life Center  
Springfield, IL**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good to be with you today during this Principals' Leadership Conference for the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. I express my gratitude to all of you for the important work that you do in your role of leadership in the area of Catholic education, whereby the young people of our diocese are being formed to be disciples of our Lord. Much of your attention on a daily basis is directed toward the service of others. It is therefore important to have an opportunity like this to turn your gaze upon yourselves and your own formation so as to be more effective leaders of those to whom you have been called to serve.

In our first reading for today's Mass, we are presented with the figure of Abraham who was given the promise that he will be "the father of a host of nations" (Genesis 17:4). In his lifetime, Abraham did not see this promise come to fulfillment, but he trusted that God's promise would be

accomplished and he therefore accepted his role as being the early leader of God's people in their journey toward the realization of that promise. There are a couple of parallels that I would like to reflect on from this story of the call of Abraham that apply to the role of leadership that all of you have been called to undertake in your roles as Catholic principals.

One point of comparison is to be found in the standard by which we lead. After promising to multiply the offspring of Abraham, God instructs Abraham on how it is that he is to lead the people when He tells Abraham: "For your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages" (Genesis 17:9). Abraham is expected to be obedient to a plan that is not his own, to submit to the one who called him, trusting that his fidelity to that plan would bring the promise to completion.

There can be the temptation when one has been given the role of leadership in any context to claim ultimate authority and operate solely on the agenda of their choosing. Leadership as a principal is not immune to such temptations. It is therefore helpful to be reminded that your leadership as principals, especially of Catholic schools, is to always be guided by the standard of our Catholic faith. As with Abraham who

operated under the laws of the covenant, so too should we always operate under the guidance of the laws of our faith.

Obedience to the teachings of our faith are not restrictive to our leadership, but rather a safeguard to ensure that we are leading correctly in our service to others and the Church. Our schools might be quite successful in various areas, such as academic recognition, athletic excellence, and community service. If, however, we do not remain faithful to the full teachings of the Church in how we form our children or in how we run our schools, we are not exercising our leadership to the fullness of what is intended or expected.

Abraham again serves as a model for us in that he remained obedient to God, even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his son, knowing that the Lord would continue to reward him for his faithfulness. At times, it can be a challenge to live our Catholic identity fully due to the resistance of our society and, in many cases, resistance from students and parents. As leaders, we are invited to imitate the faith of Abraham and remain obedient, trusting that the Lord will not abandon us, but will rather reward us for our fidelity of doing what is right, even in difficult circumstances. As with Abraham, we might not see the benefits immediately, but we trust

that our obedience will clear the path for God's work to continue into the future for our schools.

This brings me to the second parallel with the example of Abraham as a leader. As I mentioned earlier, Abraham did not live long enough to see the number of his descendants become "as numerous as the stars in the sky" (Genesis 26:4) as promised by God, but he trusted that God would be true to that promise. Out of that trust flowed the obedience which we just considered. The fruits of that obedience would continue for generations to come and continues even to this day as we identify Abraham as our "father in the faith" (Eucharistic Prayer I).

It is helpful for you, as Catholic school principals, to consider how the fruits of your obedience to the Catholic faith will impact the future of the Church. When we look at an individual school, we might think that the number is not all that large. But, if you consider the number of students who have been formed in your school in the past and then how many interactions those students have with others in their lives, the number becomes very large. There is a great opportunity to make a significant impact on a number of lives that far exceeds the students who fill the seats of our schools. By remaining faithful to Catholic identity and the full

teachings of the Church, you are preparing those disciples who will carry forth the gift of their faith and spread it throughout their community and even throughout the world.

The reality of the impact that our schools can have to touch so many people can be both exciting and intimidating at the same time. There is much expected of you as principals in ensuring that there is an environment that is conducive to the formation of our youth that is both authentic and faithful. The importance of this cannot be minimized and should never be treated as optional or secondary in any way. With that responsibility, though, comes the grace necessary to fulfill that which has been entrusted to you. It is important to pray constantly for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to guide you in your role of leadership, seeking the knowledge, understanding, and wisdom to know what is right, then asking for the fortitude necessary to put that into practice, even when we know it will be unpopular or difficult. By not backing off from what is right, the Lord will bless us and our students in ways that we may never see, but in ways that we trust will work for the betterment of our students, our schools, and our Church, as we all strive to remain faithful to Him and His Church on our journey toward Heaven.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist today, let us ask the Lord for the strength that we need to continue to persevere in being obedient to His will. May we constantly work to imitate the faith and trust of Abraham, our father in faith, as we lead the young people of our diocese to become disciples of Christ who will in turn be sent to fulfill the command of the Lord to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) and so bring to fulfillment the promise of eternal life for all of God’s people.

May God give us this grace. Amen.