

**Homily for Mass with in Celebration of Catholic Schools Week
Catholic Pastoral Center
Springfield, IL**

**The Memorial of St. Angela Merici
January 27, 2015**

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

My dear brothers and sister in Christ: it is good that we are here for this celebration during this week set aside to give thanks to God for the gift of Catholic education in our Catholic schools.

This past Sunday, I achieved a goal that I had set when I came here as a bishop four and a half years ago. My goal was to make it to each of the 129 parishes that make up the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. The parishes are the heart of the diocese, and as the shepherd of the diocese, it is my desire to get to know the people and for the people to get to know me.

Some of the larger parishes were easy to mark off the list as I visited them for the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation. Other parishes had other significant celebrations, such as a parish jubilee or, in a couple of cases, the dedication of a church. The remainder of the parishes I visited

for no special reason other than to have the opportunity to visit the parish and spend some getting to know them.

Our Catholic schools are also very important to the life of the diocese and I am always grateful for the opportunity to see the younger generation of Catholics that make up our diocese. So what am I looking for when I visit a parish or a school? Well, I do not come to see how nice the buildings are. I do not come to check on test scores to see how they compare to the rest of the schools in the area. I also do not come to see how many trophies or plaques the schools have won for their success in sports.

Instead, I take my cue from the Gospel passage where Jesus asks, “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). First and foremost, when I come to a parish or a school, I look for the presence of the Catholic **faith**. While academics, sports, and other extracurricular activities can be a good sign of the vitality of a Catholic school, all of these fall a distant second to the most important element of our Catholic faith being at the center of the identity of a school and as a guiding principle to everything that they do. If greater emphasis is given to something other than the Catholic faith in a Catholic school, then that school is not fully living up to its mission.

Catholic identity in a school is more than just having the external appearances of being Catholic, such as having crucifixes and other holy images displayed throughout the campus. These should be there, as they are visible reminders to of the faith, but the faith needs to go deeper than that. Catholic identity should be seen in how our schools take the opportunity to pray on a daily basis, reminding them that God is close to them and that they should always be turning to Him for His guidance and protection.

Our schools should be places where students learn about Christ, not just as a person about whom they would study in a history class, but as somebody whom they get to know on a personal level as one who loves them and who wants to share His life with them. They also learn the many other wonderful teachings that He has given to us to help us in our lives.

We should expect to find an environment where everybody is treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve as children of God. Each student is not just being prepared to be successful in whatever lies ahead for them in life, but they are being formed to be saints one day in Heaven. That is the greatest accomplishment we could ever hope for and, in the end, the only one that truly matters. It is for that reason that we place so

much emphasis on teaching and living the Catholic faith in our Catholic schools. I am certainly not suggesting that these other areas are unimportant, because they are, but they all find their true meaning and importance when viewed through the important lens of our Catholic faith.

This is something that priests, principals, teachers, faculty, staff, and everybody involved in Catholic education here at the diocesan level needs to take very seriously, because we all have been entrusted with the great task of forming young people in various areas. It is demanding work to make possible an environment that strives for excellence in every area, all while doing so under the guidance of our Catholic faith, a task that is becoming increasingly difficult in the world in which we live.

The responsibility of maintaining a strong Catholic identity does not fall just on the adults. Students have a very important role to play in this regard. They can be taught all of the right things to know, say and do. They can also be given an environment which is very supportive of living their Catholic faith. But they have to make the choice to put into practice their Catholic faith - we cannot do that for them. By making this conscious decision to let their lives be guided by their Catholic faith, they do far more

than they may realize in making their school one that is not just Catholic in name, but one in practice.

If each student makes the commitment to take ownership for his or her faith, then our Catholic schools will stand out as truly being Catholic. If they do not make that commitment, the entire school will suffer as a result of their actions and be Catholic in name only, regardless of how hard the adults work in teaching the students and providing a good environment in which to practice that faith.

I see an important connection here with our newly created position for Father Chuck Edwards as the Director of Stewardship and Discipleship. The choice to include the word 'discipleship' with stewardship was very intentional, as it is an essential part of making stewardship successful. We must ensure that our work in building a culture of discipleship gives significant attention to the students in our Catholic schools. We need to take a very hard look at how we are forming them and whether that formation gives enough emphasis to supporting them intentionally living their lives as disciples.

We know the old saying that you cannot give what you do not have. That applies in a very particular way in this area. An important part of

preparing our students to be disciples is to work on ensuring that those who are responsible for their formation are themselves disciples who lovingly follow Jesus in their lives.

I realize that this is not a new concept to any of you, for you have been working very diligently in this regard. I would simply like to encourage you to continue to press on with the good work that you are doing and assure you of my gratitude and continued support for you in this work. We are all moving forward in this new direction of stewardship and discipleship and it is good for us to see how interconnected all of our ministries are and how important it is for us all to work together in building a culture that is supportive of the growth that the Lord desires for His Church.

As we continue this Mass, we give thanks to God for the wonderful blessings that we have in our Catholic schools and the opportunities that they provide in forming our young people to be disciples of the Lord. Let us ask the Lord for the grace to continue to do our part in supporting this important aspect of the life of our diocese, for our efforts now will pay dividends in the future as these young people take their places in the

Church as faithful and committed followers of the Lord who strive to build up the Kingdom of God.

May God give us this grace. Amen.