

**Homily for Principals' Leadership Conference
Thursday of the 3rd Week of Easter
April 14, 2016**

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

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here at this Mass for the annual Principals' Leadership Conference for the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. During a very busy time of year in our Catholic schools, it is nice to take a pause from your work in order to be renewed so that you, as leaders in Catholic education, can more eagerly and joyfully serve the many young people under your care.

As many of you are aware, one of the things that I do when I travel to parishes for Confirmations is to meet with the *confirmandi* ahead of time in order to have a conversation with them about their Confirmation. During that conversation, I explain many of the symbols that we use during the ceremony, including the symbols that I use as a bishop. One of those symbols is the crozier, which I carry in procession, when listening to the Gospel, and when imparting blessings. Although I don't normally hold it while delivering my homily, I am holding it now for your visual reference.

The crozier, as the *confirmandi* correctly observe, resembles a shepherd's staff, and it symbolizes that I serve as the representative of Christ who is the Good Shepherd. It is my role, then, to be the chief shepherd for the flock, which is the faithful of the diocese. In John's Gospel, the Good Shepherd is described as the one who "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3). The Latin word used here for leading the sheep out is '*educit*,' a word that is recognizable to us in English as 'educate'. It is, therefore, one of my primary responsibilities as the shepherd of this diocese to lead the people to Christ by educating them in the truths of the Catholic faith and by bringing them into a more personal encounter with Him through the celebration of the sacraments.

It is, of course, physically impossible for me to fulfill this role adequately by myself. It is therefore the role of priests and deacons to be my primary collaborators in this work of teaching and sanctifying. Even that, however, is not enough, for the number of clergy is by no means sufficient to meet the educational needs of our people, and so we enlist the help of teachers to join in this important work of leading others to Christ.

We see this dynamic present in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Philip was one of the seven men chosen to be a deacon by the

Apostles. These deacons were chosen to assist the Apostles in fulfilling the increasing pastoral demands of Christians as their numbers grew. The Apostles themselves received their mission from Jesus Christ Himself just before ascending to Heaven. Philip's instruction of the Ethiopian eunuch was one of teaching, in that he was leading the Ethiopian to an understanding of the Scriptures, faithful to what had been handed on to him from Christ through the Apostles. This teaching then led to an encounter with Jesus Christ Himself through the Sacrament of Baptism.

I think it is helpful for us to be reminded of this hierarchy as we reflect on our roles in Catholic education. Everything that we do in this important work can be understood as being directed to one goal. That goal is to lead our young people to encounter Christ and His Church, thus preparing them to be His faithful disciples here on earth and, one day, saints in Heaven.

This is a goal that must be shared by every member of our Catholic schools, not just those responsible for teaching religion. Every subject that we teach can be an opportunity to impart our Catholic beliefs and values. One example would be in the realm of science. There is a growing trend among young people who are claiming to be atheists. They cite reasons

from science which supposedly disprove the existence of God. There are many Catholic resources available which help to counter these claims, clearly explaining how faith and science complement one another. We have an obligation and an opportunity to share this truth with our students.

Another area of opportunity is when we teach about the government and the creation of laws. In addition to the basic information one might find in any civics class in public schools, we can add the wisdom of the Church's teaching on social doctrine and religious liberty. We prepare our young people to be good citizens by being good Catholics, for the Catholic faith encourages us to be a leaven in society, sharing the principles that will guarantee true flourishing and authentic freedom.

It should go without saying that when it *does* come to our religion classes, it is imperative that our content is in alignment with the truths of our Catholic faith. Staying within the bounds of what the Church officially teaches is not a restriction on academic freedom. Rather, it provides the truths that guarantee the authentic understanding of who Jesus is, who the Church is, and what they teach, so that our young people can know the freedom that comes from walking in the light of truth. To do otherwise is a

great disservice to our young people and not in keeping with the task entrusted to us as Catholic educators. To teach that which is contrary to the truths of our Catholic faith is dangerous in that it leads our students to confusion about what is true and can result in their being led away from Christ and His Church.

As principals, this is something that I encourage you to be attentive to in the administration of your schools. Again, if we remain clear in our goal and from whom that goal has been set, namely Jesus Christ, then we will be much more willing to exercise our role as stewards of that which has been entrusted to us. Our love for our students will prompt us to want to give them what they most need, namely the beautiful gift of our Catholic faith as it has been given to us.

Catholic education goes beyond just teaching in the classroom. We want to lead our young people to a life of discipleship by helping them to apply the teachings of the Catholic faith to their daily lives. An example of this is the work that we are doing in our Catholic high schools through a program called Catholic Athletes for Christ. This program helps our student athletes to see how they are called to practice the various virtues of Christian discipleship while participating in their sporting activities.

Another way of inviting our young people to embrace a life of discipleship is to provide good models for them to see. As principals, you have the opportunity to encourage your teachers to be strong witnesses of our faith. It can be a difficult situation to confront one of our teachers when it becomes known that they are not modelling the type of behavior expected in such an environment. It can be tempting to just let the issue slide. Once again, though, we must be reminded of our goal and then take seriously our responsibility to provide an environment that is as conducive as possible to helping to lead our young people to a life centered in Christ.

When seen from this perspective, your role in Catholic education brings more in the way of expectations than your counterparts in public education. At the same time, I hope that you see the privileged opportunity that you have to help in shaping the next generation of disciples for our Church. Catholic education is an integral element that will contribute to the long-term success of our efforts in promoting a way of life based on stewardship and discipleship in our diocese. I encourage you to see the important part that you play in this process and I invite you to instill that sense of excitement in your teachers as well.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist, the “bread of life” (John 6:48), let us ask the Lord for the grace to be faithful to the work that has been entrusted to us to lead our young people to a deeper understanding of the truth in every area of study, but especially in the teachings of our Catholic faith. This is the sure path that will lead them to encounter Jesus Christ Himself, who is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6). From that encounter, they cannot help but commit themselves to be His disciples in this life as we all journey together toward our ultimate goal of being saints forever in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.