

**Homily for Catholic Schools Week  
Our Lady of Lourdes, Decatur, St. Boniface, Edwardsville, and  
Marquette Catholic High School, Alton**

**January 31 - February 2, 2017**

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

Reverend Fathers and Deacons,  
Dear administrators and staff,  
Teachers, students, and parents:

It is good to be with you today as we celebrate the gift that Catholic Schools are, not only to our parishes, but also to our greater civic communities. As students, we do not always appreciate all that our schools do for us in terms of helping us not only learn more about the physical world, but also in terms of helping us deepen our relationship with Christ Jesus and with strengthening our relationship with one another. This threefold mission of Catholic schools is at the heart of the theme for this Catholic Schools Week 2017: Communities of Faith, Knowledge, and Service. I would like to say a few words about each of these.

First of all: **Faith.**

We are sometimes tempted to forget that the primary purpose of our Catholic schools is not an education in mathematics or grammar or music or social studies, but an education in the faith, and more than this: the

principal mission of our schools is not simply to help students learn about the faith, but to help them encounter the person of Jesus Christ who loves us and always waits for us with open arms. As the Holy Father Pope Francis recently reminded us,

Catholic schools, which always strive to join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a most valuable resource for the evangelization of culture, even in those countries and cities where hostile situations challenge us to greater creativity in our search for suitable methods.<sup>1</sup>

This is why we should strive to do all that we can to ensure that anyone who desires one can receive an education in our schools. This is also an important part of why I have decided the time is ripe to hold our fourth Diocesan Synod, which will formally open on April 11<sup>th</sup>.

By calling for this diocesan-wide consultation, it is, as I recently said at a prayer service beginning a period of prayer and formation for the diocesan synod, we have entered into an important moment for us as the local Church of Springfield in Illinois to “consider how we can make a communal commitment as a diocesan community of clergy and laity regarding discipleship and stewardship as a way of life. Closely related to this will be for us to look at how we can foster community-wide support for Catholic education so that more students will be able to attend Catholic

schools.”<sup>2</sup> How can we not welcome everyone into a deeper friendship with Jesus?

Before we can successfully invite all Catholics to support our schools to lead more boys and girls to Jesus, we each need to deepen and strengthen our loving commitment to follow Jesus who, as C.S. Lewis reminds us, came to give us not mere improvement as persons, but redemption from sin; he came “not simply to produce better men [and women] of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man [and woman].”<sup>3</sup>

It is for this reason that each of our teachers should always remember that, like our students’ parents, they are also catechists who should always seek to instill and enliven the faith of Jesus Christ in our students. In your words and deeds, your students and children should always find in you a reflection of Jesus’ love for them. This is why, as Pope Francis rightly said:

On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.” This first proclamation is called “first” not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment.<sup>4</sup>

This continual reminder of God's love for each of us can awaken our curiosity in the natural world as we look for the signs of his love that God has placed within it.

Next, we consider the importance of: **Knowledge.**

The second part of our theme for this Catholic Schools Week, knowledge, is comprised of two aspects. The first aspect of knowledge concerns the world around us. By using this virtue of the intellect, we study grammar, mathematics, social studies, the arts, etc., through logic and step-by-step questioning. We ask to know what something is, what its purpose is, and how it relates to other things. By asking questions about the world we come to know more about it. This is an important aspect of our Catholic schools, but it is not the most important aspect of them.

The second - and more important - aspect of knowledge concerns one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. The spiritual gift of knowledge "is immeasurably more powerful, more important, and operates in an instant, being operated by the Holy Spirit."<sup>5</sup> Through the gift of knowledge, the Holy Spirit helps us "to notice the uniqueness in our neighbor and for our uniqueness to be acknowledged as well. Finally, this gift helps us to know

God and to cultivate our friendship with him.”<sup>6</sup> In everything we do in our schools, we must strive to impart both aspects of knowledge.

The third part of our theme for Catholic Schools Week is: **Service.**

By faith, we begin to see the many signs of his love that God has placed throughout the created world. The recognition of these signs awakens in us a desire to understand them and to know him more clearly. It is the knowledge of his love and our friendship with him that stirs our hearts to share the knowledge of his love with others through acts of service.

Here, again, Pope Francis has urged us to go out of ourselves to encounter others:

Only conversion of heart can make our world, which is full of terror and violence, more humane. And that means patience, justice, prudence, dialogue, integrity, solidarity with victims, the needy, the poorest, limitless dedication, love even unto death for the sake of the other. When you have understood that quite deeply, then you can change the world as committed Christians.<sup>7</sup>

Whenever I learn of something some of our students have done in service of our neighbors, my heart is always gladdened by their generosity. Through visits to nursing homes, food drives, clothing drives, and many other acts of service, we do a lot to bring the warmth of Jesus’ love to

others, but there is always more that we can do. We should strive not to see our acts of service merely as something we have to do as a matter of obligation; rather, let us ask the Lord to open our hearts to the fullness of His love so that His love bursts forth from our hearts with joy.

In conclusion, my dear young friends, I tell you once again with great conviction and certainty that Jesus Christ loves you; that He gave His life to save you; and that He is now living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you! Open your hearts to Him and you will find everything your hearts desire. If you live with your hearts open to Him, our schools will truly be communities of faith, knowledge, and service.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 134.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas John Paprocki, Homily for the Prayer Service for the Opening of the Preliminary Phase of the Diocesan Synod, January 22, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 164.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Vost, *The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit: Every Spiritual Warrior's Guide to God's Invincible Gifts* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 2016), p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Amodei, *Send Out Your Spirit: A Confirmation Candidate's Handbook for Faith* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2010), 198).

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, in *DoCat: What to Do? The Social Teaching of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016), p. 11.