

Fr. John's Homily for January 29, 2023; 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

JMJ CHS

This is Catholic Schools Week and we welcome our students from Holy Spirit Catholic Elementary School who are assisting here at today's Mass. They have a full week of special activities planned, culminating with Trivia Night next Saturday evening which is a School fundraiser. And I hope you all had a chance to read this month's issue of Faith Magazine which talks about the status of Catholic education in the Diocese and beyond. Surprisingly, or maybe not-so-surprisingly, the statistics are kind of good. Enrollment is up. And our School, after a few years of challenges with pandemics and personnel issues, I think is back on track with a new optimism. And we also believe that the new construction around here will be good for both Church and School.

Just a few personal comments. When I was a brand new priest over at St. Joseph in Howell, the priests of the vicariate looked over in this direction with a great deal of curiosity about what then pastor Fr. Bill Thomas was doing. He had a vision. Actually, it was simply the classic Catholic vision that every Catholic Church should have a school. And so he was opening a new Catholic school. But the trend was moving in the opposite direction. And at least some of the local priests thought he might be off his rocker. I was not one of them. I was too new and naive and so I just looked around wondering about all of this and where it was headed. And, needless to say, the thought never even crossed my mind that in six years, I would inherit this school and all the problems associated with keeping a Catholic school open, keeping it viable, and most important, keeping it Catholic.

Fast forward to the present and with a lot of help from our patron St. Philomena, I think that we are entering into a new era and we, too, can anticipate increased enrollment and a renewal of our Catholic identity. Our purpose will be, as it has always been, to turn out genuine, real-life, practicing Catholics, well prepared for their future as adults, professionals, parents, citizens and of course, saints. I mean, really, what would it profit a man if he gained the whole world, but in the end, forfeited his soul?

Now, our weekly obligation is that we should reflect upon the readings of the day and there is one that I think could be related to our theme of Catholic schools. It's the second reading, from Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he speaks about God choosing the nobodies of this world to reduce to nothing, those who thought they were something. This is one of my favorites and I have spoken about it many times, particularly to our school children, because, well, God has chosen a lot of young people throughout the years to do just that. We have had many children saints. Our own patron, St. Philomena, certainly would be an example. A virgin martyr who refused to submit to the desires of the emperor, and paid with her life.

Another favorite of mine, St. Joan of Arc, is essentially the same thing. But her story is so incredible that people think it's fictional – God choosing a 17-year-old girl to lead France against the English. But she, too, paid with her life. Captured by the enemy, tried and convicted and burned at the stake as a heretic by a corrupt local Church. But the English eventually left and France regained its identity through the sacrificial efforts of this girl warrior.

More recently in our times, the three shepherd children of Fatima delivered a very important message from the Blessed Mother. The message was rejected by friends and family and the local government, and at least, in the beginning, even the Church. But their message is more relevant today than ever. We would do well to listen to the admonition, delivered by three little nobodies, to pray the rosary, for peace in the world. Here in the school, and in the home. Very urgent right now with the situation in Ukraine.

And how about little Bernadette, of Lourdes? In my book, she's the classic "nobody" – growing up in poverty, suffering from bad health and bad grades in school. She was teased by her friends, ostracized by adults, including her Catholic school teachers. Even the local pastor had to be persuaded. If you have never seen this story, you should look up, "The Song of Bernadette". A book made into an award-winning movie in the 1940s which is still quite relevant today. You can watch the full movie on YouTube.

These, and many other saint stories like them, are inspiring to young people. We tell them these stories in each classroom and within the context of every subject. And of course here at their three weekday Masses. We tell them to imitate those saints so that they, too, may become saints themselves. That, after all, is the vision and the stated goal of our Parish School here at Holy Spirit. There is a sign in the School office that says, "Christ is the reason for this school." And our purpose is to get our students to Heaven. And people in Heaven are called..... saints.

I would like to return to something I said at the beginning about that "surprising" or "not-so-surprising" increase in enrollment. I have been observing the passing scene for quite some time now, and have been watching and waiting to see if Catholic parents of children in public schools would eventually come to their senses, see the writing on the wall and enroll their children in....a Catholic school. I can see why they haven't – Catholic schools are expensive, public schools are free. And the facilities in public schools are pretty impressive. But a lot of Catholic students have been damaged at other schools where, over the years, new ideas have slowly been introduced. Bad ideas that have been taking an incredible toll on our culture, and the children who learn there.

But, you know, all of us Catholics are immersed in that culture, and I believe we are all affected by it, whether we realize it or not. If we breathe in the air, and there is pollution, regardless if we

can see it, or feel it, or smell it, it will slowly, but surely, affect us. And this has been true of our Catholic schools, as well. But I can say this, that we, the Church, the Body of Christ, has slowly recognized this. The scales have fallen from our eyes, and we can see more clearly now. We breathed in the air. We drank the Kool-Aid, and now we recognize that we have lost much of our Catholic identity. Some Catholics realized this early on and pulled their kids out of Catholic schools saying, “My children can lose their faith for free in public schools.” And so the homeschool movement began. And we should recognize them as well today in Catholic Schools Week because, well, we do accept the fact that parents are the first educators of their children, and some choose to do it at home. But now, more and more Catholics are resolved to take our schools back. That’s true in the Diocese of Lansing and in many other places around the Catholic Church in America. And again, if you read those Faith Magazine articles, you will get a good sense of what is currently going on out there with the hope for positive news for the future.

There have been many saints, young and old, male and female, simple and brilliant, who throughout the ages have been foundational to Catholic Education in one way or another. Just in this month of January we celebrated St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. John Neumann and St. Thomas Aquinas whose feastday is today. And next week, St. John Bosco who taught us how to respect children as cherished sons and daughters of God. And check out [St. Joseph Calasanz](#), identified in Faith Magazine as the most important saint you’ve never heard of. St. Joseph lived 500 years ago, in Europe, where he developed a free Catholic school system to assist the poor where every Catholic family that truly wanted a Catholic education should be able to get it. All of these saints have been teachers to us and shared their wisdom in different ways in different generations. We need to remember and celebrate that we are all beneficiaries of their combined legacies.

And so again, here at Holy Spirit Catholic Church and School we are, indeed, encouraged and hopeful that the future will be very bright.

~Fr. John