

**Homily for Catholic Schools Week Masses
January 30 to February 2, 2023**

**Decatur Catholic Schools
Our Lady of Lourdes Church
Decatur, Illinois
January 30, 2023**

**Effingham Catholic Schools
St. Anthony High School
Effingham, Illinois
February 1, 2023**

**Fr. McGivney Catholic High School
Glen Carbon, Illinois
February 2, 2023**

**Marquette Catholic High School
Alton, Illinois
February 2, 2023**

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

Reverend Fathers, deacons, consecrated religious, administrators, faculty, staff, students and parents, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good for us to be here to take part in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as we celebrate Catholic Schools Week, during which we renew our commitment to the mission of Catholic Schools in forming the youth of our Church into intentional disciples of Jesus Christ.

The Catholic Church educates more than ten-thousand students in thirty-six Catholic grade schools and seven Catholic high schools in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. These forty-three schools represent the Church's largest investment of resources in pastoral ministry in our diocese, reflecting both the requisite resources for operating effective schools and the high priority we place on handing on the faith to the next generation. More than places of academic learning, our schools are centers of formation for children and community for Catholic families. It is common for many of our schools to have served multiple generations of children from the same families, and they are central to our lived experience and history. Our schools are staffed by dedicated teachers and administrators who have devoted their lives to the formation of our young people. Our Catholic school system is a central pillar of our faith community and brings much vitality, purpose, and clarity of mission.

Our schools, however, are facing significant challenges that, if left unaddressed, threaten to undermine their stability, vitality, and effectiveness in fulfilling their mission of discipleship. To varying degrees, our schools are facing financial, operational, and cultural disruptions and risks just at the time when the need for a Catholic school system is more

urgent than it has been for several generations. Our schools are in urgent need of renewal. The Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is confronting this reality with a concerted effort to renew all aspects of Catholic education in the diocese—beginning with clarity of mission and purpose and expanding through several, interrelated strategic efforts intended to strengthen the effectiveness, affordability, and sustainability of our schools.

In the weeks and months ahead, we will be presenting more information about this renewal effort, the challenges we are seeking to address in Catholic education, the concrete initiatives we are undertaking for renewal, and the expectations and guidelines for our schools' engagement in this renewal. The title given to this renewal effort will be: *“Higher Calling, Higher Standards: Renewal of the Mission of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois.”*

Consistent with the second declaration of our Fourth Diocesan Synod of 2017, which states that “all pastoral initiatives are set in relation to holiness,” and the fifth declaration, which states, “Formation for discipleship and stewardship as a way of life shall be the primary focus of the catechetical programs in our Catholic and parochial schools, high schools, and parish schools of religion...” our schools have a higher calling than just academic

learning, and we have higher standards to which we hold ourselves accountable. We also have an opportunity to impact our culture in positive way and fulfill our mission to sanctify the culture and world in which we live. The Catholic education renewal effort in our diocese seeks to refocus all our resources and energies on the higher calling of discipleship formation and to ensure that we are aligned and equipped to sustain the higher standards associated with this critical mission.

The key to this renewal of Catholic education in our diocese is clarity of mission, so I wish to state clearly that **the mission of our Catholic schools in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is the formation of Catholic, Christian disciples.** This mission demands that our schools provide intellectual, spiritual, and human formation for young people who are equipped for human flourishing and for eternal life with Jesus Christ; and that they support the Christian family, providing formation and community for families to grow in virtue, in love of God and in service of neighbor. Our schools exist to help our young people understand who God created them to be and how to understand and engage with the world that God has created for them to steward. Our schools recognize the responsibility of parents to serve as the first teachers of their faith to their children, a divine

calling that flows from the sacramental character of their baptism and holy matrimony, and we seek to support and encourage parents in fulfillment of this duty. Likewise, our teachers have a prophetic calling flowing from their baptism and confirmation, to teach and promote the faith. Our teachers are not merely employees. Our teachers are ministers of the Church, aiding pastors and the bishop in fulfilling the Church's mission to promote and defend the faith.

In their fulfillment of this mission, Catholic schools in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois hold themselves to high standards marked by seven essential characteristics:

1. *Inspired by a Supernatural Vision*: all aspects of the instruction, curriculum, environment, and culture of our schools are rooted in and flow from a faith in and understanding of the Blessed Trinity as the deepest reality, and embrace our destiny to live eternally with God. Our destiny to live with God in beatitude sets the horizon of vision for all our schools and all the work that they do in forming Christian disciples.
2. *Imbued with a Catholic Worldview across the Curriculum*: Flowing from the supernatural vision, our schools reveal the unity of the Creator in creation. In teaching math and science, we reveal the intelligibility, and

goodness of creation, which points back to the intelligence and goodness of the Creator. In art and music, we reveal the transcendentals of truth, beauty, and goodness that point us back to the source of all that is true, beautiful, and good. In literature and history, we explore the human soul and moral life in relation to God, and the drama of the human response to God's loving plan and the providence and active presence of God in the unfolding of human life.

3. *Founded on Christian Anthropology*: our policies, curriculum, and instruction help young people to come to a fuller understanding of their identity as children of God, an awareness of the effects of the Fall of Adam and Eve, a grateful awareness of the truth and the promise of our redemption in Christ Jesus, and a commitment to the struggle for growth in holiness and virtue through worship, and the sacramental life. We equip our students to flourish by helping them to build habits of virtue and avoid habits of vice, and we foster a sense of peace and confidence in their identity as children of God, created in His image, and redeemed and recreated in Christ.

4. *Animated by a Spirit of Community and Communion*: our schools exist to support parents as the first teachers of the faith, to strengthen and enhance the lives of families, and to provide a community in which Catholic families can live and raise their families together. Our school communities are an extended part of our parish communities, and, as such, our pastors, teachers, principals, staff, students, and parents are “living stones” of the Church of which Christ is the cornerstone and all are part of the Mystical Body of Christ. The awareness of this deepest reality animates a sense of true communion and community within our schools – one that extends seamlessly from and to the life of our parishes and cannot be separated from them. Engagement and alignment of school parents with this spirit of community and communion is essential and cannot be taken for granted.

5. *Sustained by Gospel Witness*: All administrators, teachers, staff, and coaches in our schools fulfill a prophetic role of witness by their lives and serve, explicitly, as ministers of the Church. They are called to preach the gospel in what they say and how they live, and they instruct and encourage young people to do likewise. Our students are called to bear witness inside and outside of school in how they treat others, in their

concern for the poor and marginalized, and in their upright living in harmony with the Gospel. Our school families are called to live in a manner that reflects their baptismal identity and their vocation of raising children in the faith.

6. *Accessible, Affordable, Stable*: in each parish and deanery, pastoral plans are established to ensure that all the faithful have access to Catholic schools. Each school will establish a plan to fully fund its operations through financial support of the parishes and benefactors without charging tuition. The founding of Catholic schools in the United States was made possible only because of the stewardship of service offered by religious sisters, brothers, and priests, who basically volunteered their efforts with little more than room and board for their material compensation. Lay teachers today also contribute some stewardship of service, as the salaries of Catholic school teachers are less than what they could be making in the public schools, but costs are constantly increasing due to inflation and the need to pay a just wage. The continued viability of Catholic schools will thus require stewardship on the part of the whole community of faith. Just as public schools are supported by all taxpayers whether they have children or not, Catholic schools must be supported

by all the parishioners, lest Catholic schools become either an option only for the wealthy or disappear entirely. The parents of school children should not have to shoulder this burden alone. Our Lord's command to make disciples of all the nations is the responsibility of the entire community of faith (cf., Matthew 28:19-20). Diocesan, deanery, parish, and school leaders must work creatively and diligently to plan for the vitality and stability of Catholic education in our communities above the particular needs of individual schools. Where fitting and practical, collaborative Catholic school systems are established to secure these aims of accessible, affordable, and stable schools in each of the communities across the diocese.

7. *Organized and Governed from the Heart of the Church:* Each of our school communities finds its identity, mission, and purpose within the Catholic community. Our schools are governed from the authority that Christ has entrusted to the diocesan bishop as a successor to the apostles. Parish schools or community Catholic school systems are to be governed by pastors of participating parishes, and governing boards of high schools or other schools not directly sponsored by parishes. Schools sponsored by religious are to involve the diocesan bishop or delegates,

along with local pastors in their governance to ensure the alignment and shared mission of Catholic education.

In sum, Catholic Schools are a central part of our obligation and mission to go forth and make disciples. They are a most effective means of forming the next generation in the faith and providing a community of Christian discipleship in our parishes. Given the changes in our culture, in public education, and in our regulatory environment, our Catholic schools are now urgently needed as a safe haven for families to help their children grow, develop, and flourish. Given this pastoral imperative, serious and sustained efforts must be undertaken to shore up the sustainability and vitality of our schools as we renew our evangelical mission. This renewal effort is fraught with challenges, obstacles, difficulties, and hard decisions. It is also the work that God has called us to at this moment in the life of the Church, and we embark on the journey of renewal with confidence in his providence and guidance.

May God give us this grace. Amen.