

Homily for the Mass Celebrating the Service of Catholic School Principals
Wednesday, April 9, 2025 | *Memorial of Saint Casilda*

Corpus Christi Priory
Saint Francis of Assisi Church
Springfield, Illinois

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

My dear brother priests, Norbertine Fathers, Catholic School Principals, Curia staff, honored guests, brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good to be with you to celebrate this Mass together as we rejoice in and reflect upon the service of our Catholic School leaders across the whole Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. As I think you know, before celebrating the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion, I always meet with the candidates before Mass to explain the religious symbols we use and answer any question they might have. I enjoy these sessions as you never know what a third grader will ask and they keep me on my toes! At one of these recent question and answer sessions, a third-grader asked me what my favorite feast day was. I said my favorite feast day is Easter. I explained that, while Christmas is a joyful time to celebrate God taking on our human nature in the flesh, the greatness of that mystery takes on even greater significance by virtue of Christ rising from the dead, which

we will soon celebrate on Easter Sunday and throughout the Easter season. Saint Paul wrote that “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17). It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead that gives us the essence of our identity as Christians.

You have been called to bring this Good News to children. This is no easy undertaking in our world today. The task that lies before you calls to mind the old motto of the Royal Air Force: *per ardua ad astra*: “through adversity, to the stars.” Over the expanse of 15,000 square miles, you, the leaders of our 43 Catholic Schools, love, care for, and form over 10,000 souls. To you is the charge to make missionary disciples of this generation, so that their children and grandchildren will have the option of an education that combines academic wisdom with a firm foundation in Catholic faith and morals. As you can see looking around you in this place of sacred beauty, you are not the first to gather here, reflect on our common challenges, and be nourished to do great things for God in your service to others. The Hospital Sisters were serving “through adversity to the stars,” long before any of us.

You have been called to bring Jesus Christ to those young ones of whom Our Lord Himself said, “suffer the little children to come unto me.”

In view of the trials that you face with proclaiming the Gospel in the context of parents who can often seem entitled, students who appear to be disengaged, faculty who may be off task, and a culture that seems to be bent on calling our children to the most destructive of pastimes, there are days when you must feel that your vocation is as promising as the ordeal that Nebuchadnezzar lays before Ahab, Meshack, and Abednego. The furnace heated seven times over, as we hear from the Book of Daniel in today's Old Testament lesson, may sound like that PTO meeting or social media issue that you have to face and resolve. Please know that I pray for you in these struggles that you face daily. I know that the staff of our Department of Catholic Education regularly ask the Lord to send His holy angels to watch over you, strengthen you, and protect you in the many undertakings of leadership you face in our Catholic schools.

For any Catholic School principal I have ever known, most every season is a kind of Lent, with plenty of opportunities to grow in humility through adversity – yet we are called higher – *through* such adversity to the stars – to heaven. You sacrifice your time, peace, and energy to bring Jesus Christ to students and families in a broken world. My staff and I admire and salute you for the heroic love you show to the young people under your care.

You have been formed for this noble work by the Norbertine Fathers and the Curia Catholic Education staff. You have answered to the rally proclaimed in “Higher Calling, Higher Standards.” You have benefitted from the *Evermode Institute*, Days of Reflection here in the Corpus Christi Priory, and workshops led by the Catholic Education team. You do not stand alone in this awe-inspiring and daunting labor of extending Jesus’ mission in the world.

This formation is vital for being able to forge an authentic Catholic culture for our schools. In a world that calls our young people to focus mainly on themselves and to accord the highest value to their own ever-changing and confused impulses, you set an example and establish an environment for them that incarnates truth, morality, care for others, and a love of their Creator. This noble and difficult work starts with reminding young people that they did not make themselves. The first idol that must fall is the idea that we are beholden to no one but ourselves. The golden statue of self and disordered impulses that treat the body and others as “things” to be “used,” is a false god that must be called out and overthrown.

Experiences like today’s Principals Leadership Forum give you the opportunity to connect with colleagues and go deeper into the concepts of

the integration of faith and reason under the guidance of Father Robert Spitzer, S.J., or the Theology of the Body with the Catholic Education team. These initiatives are embodiments of the seven hallmarks that should characterize all of our schools, as articulated in my pastoral letter, "Higher Calling, Higher Standards." These experiences form you so that you can walk through the fiery furnace of adversity with hearts set on fire with the Holy Spirit to bring others with you to His protection. You have the duty to set different norms, establishing all things in the context of holiness among students, parents, teachers, and support staff.

Today, we take stock of the crisis that is leading so many of our young people away from God, and ask ourselves what we can do to protect them against great harms that are injuring their faith. Our first step is taking time away from the incessant lights and buzzing of communications devices to be fully present to Jesus Christ and to acknowledge His presence with us in the Eucharist. We know that we can give our young people better answers than the world does about Creation and about who they are. We realize that first we have to open our own hearts to Jesus so that we can witness authentically to our young people about the real relationship of faith to reason and their primary identity as sons and daughters of God.

We also know that there are specific and decisive elements in a Catholic school and parish setting that empower our students to stand strong in the faith. It is essential that we ensure that we are providing opportunities for our young people to have authentic encounters with the Risen Christ. We must inspire teachers to be compassionately and genuinely engaged in our students' growth in personal holiness. We must be intentional about forming a school culture that is authentically Catholic so that students have a connection to the faith that transcends weekly attendance at worship. Most challenging of all, we have to find ways to call Catholic fathers to step up consistently and be the faith leaders for their children and families. Through prayer, grace, creativity, and support to one another, we can rise to meet these challenges.

Overcoming the trials of our diseased worldly culture begins with steeping ourselves in the ideas, example, witness, deeds, and ideals articulated and lived out by Jesus Christ in the Gospels. We must fix our gaze on Him as our true North Star, because He is the way, the truth, and the life. As He reminds us today: "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." True freedom—being freed from the bonds of sin so that we can do

great things for the God who loved us enough to bring each of us into existence, and who calls us to serve as teachers, shepherds, and healers for one another – begins by drawing close to Jesus and learning truth from Him. He has called you, and you have answered His call and come here to be formed. You will be sent from here after being fed by Our Lord, so that you can form missionary disciples for Him. It all starts with understanding that we are called, formed, and then sent to proclaim the good news that is healing and salvation in Jesus Christ. To you is His forceful exclamation: “Blessed are they who have kept the word with a generous heart and yield a harvest through perseverance.” If you abide in Him, you will come “through adversity, to the stars” – you will pass the trial and attain heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.