

**Homily for Catholic Schools Week Masses
January 28-30, 2025**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As your Bishop, it is good to be with you for this Mass celebrating Catholic Schools Week. The theme for Catholic Schools Week 2025 is “Catholic Schools: Alive in Christ.” Our Catholic schools exist to help bring young people into a closer relationship with Jesus. When we become aware of Our Lord’s love for us, we respond by loving Him in return. In this way, we truly become “alive in Christ.”

This year the Catholic Church is celebrating the Ordinary Jubilee Year of 2025. A Jubilee Year is a significant moment in the life of the Church in which she celebrates how Christ showed His love for us through His birth, His suffering and death, and His resurrection.¹ Proclaimed every twenty-five years since the thirteenth century, the celebration of jubilee years typically includes pilgrimages, processions, celebrations of Mass, and an invitation to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. These liturgical celebrations are opportunities to receive the Lord’s mercy, especially through the practice of the Jubilee indulgence, and lead to the performance of works of mercy.

The theme for this Jubilee Year is “Pilgrims of Hope.” In his letter declaring the Jubilee Year of 2025 Pope Francis wrote, “Hope is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross ... By his perennial presence in the life of the pilgrim Church, the Holy Spirit illumines all believers with the light of hope. He keeps that light burning, like an ever-burning lamp, to sustain and invigorate our lives. Christian hope does not deceive or disappoint because it is grounded in the certainty that nothing and no one may ever separate us from God’s love.”²

What does it mean to have hope? Hope is not the same thing as optimism. The word “optimism” comes from the Latin word *optimus*, which means, “the best.” An optimist may seek to put the best spin on a bad situation. As such, optimism can be an attitude that looks for something good even when everything looks bad. There is nothing wrong with that, but optimism in that sense could also be superficial or even an act, pretending to look on the bright side of things while feeling miserable inside.

Hope goes much deeper. Hope is based on an interior trust in God and a belief that divine grace ultimately leads to good. It is no accident that hope is one of the theological virtues, along with faith and love. If we

have a solid faith in God's Providence, we will have hope for the future, and this will lead to a life of loving God and neighbor.

The symbol of hope is an anchor, inspired by the Letter to the Hebrews, which says, "May we who have taken refuge in [Christ] be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered" (Heb 6:18-20).

Our Catholic schools are an anchor in our families and in our communities, because our Catholic Schools provide a firm grounding that gives hope for a promising future for our young people. That hope comes from our Catholic faith that has been handed down over the centuries for almost 2,000 years and which we continue to teach in our Catholic schools.

In that regard, during this Jubilee Year 2025 we also celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, which promulgated the Nicene Creed that we still use today and recite right after the homily at Mass on Sundays and Holydays of Obligation. Just imagine, seventeen centuries during which, using these same words, billions of Christians have expressed their belief in God as the One who loves, the One who is beloved, and the One who is the Love between them. During that

gathering in Nicaea, in the year 325, the Council delegates came to a unified statement of who Jesus Christ is. We are the heirs of those who gathered so long ago, and we too believe in the mystery of God's continuing presence in our world, and in our call to live in that mystery while being Christ's hands and feet in our concrete service and generous love for suffering humanity.

The Creed begins with the words, "I believe," and then summarizes the essential points of what we believe as Christians, with separate paragraphs about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, with a concluding paragraph about our beliefs in the Catholic Church and some essential dogmas, such as the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life.

All people believe in something. Even atheism is a belief, namely the belief that there is no God. I would argue that atheism is actually harder to prove than belief in God. The Church "teaches that God . . . can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 36). In contrast, how does one prove the non-existence of God? It is sheer fantasy to imagine that the exquisite details of the ordered nature of the universe and of human existence came about by some random coincidence.

It is fitting during this Catholic Schools Week that we celebrate the feast days of three saints who were influential in the education of young people.

Monday, January 27th, was the feast day of Saint Angela Merici, the foundress of the Ursuline Sister, the first teaching order especially for poor young girls. She sought to spread the Gospel to families through the education of future wives and mothers. Saint Angela died in northern Italy in 1540.

Tuesday, January 28th, is the feast day of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican Priest who wrote many works of theology, the most famous of which is his *Summa Theologiae*, or summation of theology. He is the patron saint of Catholic schools, colleges, universities, philosophers, theologians, and booksellers. Saint Thomas Aquinas died in 1274.

Friday, January 31st, is the feast day of Saint John Bosco, who founded the Salesians, a community dedicated to educating youth. He was a pioneer in vocational training and was the first saint in history to be interviewed by the press. He was also the first canonized saint in whose honor a national holiday was declared in Italy. He is patron saint of editors and is known as the "Apostle of Youth." Saint John Bosco died in northern Italy in 1888.

We pray for Saint Angela Merici, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Saint John Bosco to ask God for the graces we need to make our Catholic schools pillars of the Catholic faith, anchors of hope, and places where students will be fully alive with the love of Christ.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ (Cf. Lk 4:19; John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente*, nos. 11- 16).

² Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, given in Rome on May 9, 2024, par. 3; accessed online December 23, 2024, at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html.