

**Homily for Mass with the Jacksonville Catholic Schools
In Celebration of Catholic Schools Week
Our Saviour Church, Jacksonville**

**The Memorial of Saint Thomas Aquinas
January 28, 2014**

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

My brother priests and deacons, consecrated women, honored guests, dear principals and teachers, staff and volunteers, parents and students, it is a joy to be with you today for this celebration during this week set aside to give thanks for the gift of Catholic education in our Catholic schools.

I would like to begin by asking you to consider a simple question: What is the purpose of a school? Without much thought, I think that most of you would probably answer that the purpose of a school is to teach so that students can learn. That can be followed up with another question: *Why* do we come to school to learn? The answer to this question might be a little more difficult for us to answer. In one of the communities in our diocese, the public school system in that city offers a fairly simple statement that serves as an answer to this question. The statement says: "In a safe and secure environment, each student in the ... District will develop into a lifelong learner with the skills and knowledge necessary for the next

steps in life.”¹ Those last words are especially helpful in answering the question of why we learn, that students may have what is necessary for the next steps in life.

Those next steps in life vary based on a student’s age. For those in middle school, you are preparing for the next step of study in high school. For those in high school, you are preparing, in many cases, for the next step of a college education. Once in college, the preparation is geared toward the next step of a career that will guide you in your life as an adult. The majority of our lives will be spent away from school, living in society, so it is safe to conclude that one of the main reasons for learning in school is to prepare to take the next step as members of society, hopefully members who will be responsible and productive for the good of the world around them.

All of this is indeed very good, for the world needs people who are educated and capable of providing for the needs of society, whether it be as doctors, scientists, teachers, business professionals, or factory workers. In various ways, your education in school prepares you for these important roles that are your next steps in life.

As we celebrate this week, we are not celebrating schools in general, but in a specific way, we are celebrating *Catholic* schools. What is the difference? Catholic schools are indeed quite successful in preparing people to take the steps into being contributing members to the world around them, but there is something more that we provide, something that should be at the core of every Catholic school. As a Catholic school, we are not just concerned about forming productive citizens, we are first and foremost concerned about the step that we take from this life to the next. We are concerned, therefore, with forming saints.

As people of faith, we know that our ultimate goal in this life is to be found worthy to enter into Heaven. No earthly achievements can take the place of spending eternal life with God and all of the saints in Heaven. This is not to say that the things of this world are bad or that being successful here on earth is wrong. Our faith, however, reminds us that this world is not all that there is for us, but that we await something more, something far greater when we take the final step at the end of our lives. Being solidly rooted in our faith, we are able to pass through this life guided by principles that are focused on loving God and loving our

neighbor, principles which, when lived well, will both benefit our world and assist us and others in our journey toward Heaven.

Each year, a theme is proposed for the celebration of Catholic Schools Week to provide some direction for us to focus on during that week. This year's theme is titled "Catholic Schools: Communities of Faith, Knowledge, and Service." These three elements of faith, knowledge, and service are integral to the mission of every Catholic school. The order of these items is not accidental, but each one builds upon the other and offers for us a roadmap for how the mission of Catholic schools is to be lived.

The first element is that the Catholic school is a community of faith. The Catholic faith must be our starting point for everything that we do. This is one important area where Catholic schools differ from public schools. Although individuals attending public schools may be people of faith, it is not something that is promoted. In fact, it is often discouraged. Knowledge therefore becomes the number one priority. In our Catholic schools, however, we recognize that knowledge is not opposed to faith. Think for example of our study of the universe. Many people look at this as a mystery to be solved by science alone. In our Catholic schools, however, while we respect various scientific explanations for how things

work, we see everything as the product of God the Creator. Knowledge, therefore, is enhanced by our faith, directing it toward the eternal truths of God's marvelous plan.

By making our schools communities of faith first, we are able to direct the knowledge that we acquire toward the living out of the final element of our theme for Catholic Schools Week, that our schools are to be communities of service. Our Catholic faith reminds us that all of the gifts that we receive are to be put at the service of others for the building up of God's Kingdom here on earth. When faith is not a part of this equation, it is much easier to fall into the temptation to use our gifts for our own selfish interests and desires.

For example, knowledge rooted in the Catholic faith guides doctors to be mindful that their talents are to be used to help people who are suffering, as opposed to seeing their skills as a path for greater financial security and worldly comfort. A knowledge guided by the Catholic faith will encourage a politician to work for legislation which respects the God-given dignity of every human life instead of taking positions which are only directed toward gaining more votes for themselves so as to advance their own personal ideas and agendas.

This is not to say that our brothers and sisters in public schools are incapable of this, for many have been quite successful in using their knowledge and talents for God and His Church. There is also no guarantee that those who are products of Catholic schools will direct their lives according to the Catholic faith. While Catholic schools can put before our eyes the importance of knowing and living the faith, it depends on each and every one of us to embrace that gift and let it be the guiding principle for our lives. I encourage you, dear students, to see this aspect of your education in a Catholic school as a great blessing and not just an additional subject you have to take in the process of gaining knowledge for your future careers. By personally making the Catholic faith your first priority during these important years of formation, you will be preparing yourselves to become not just good citizens, but, more importantly, you will be preparing yourselves to become saints, which is the reason for your very existence.

Today the Church celebrates the Memorial of Saint Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest teachers of all time. Even though he died over 700 years ago, his writings are still very influential and important works that teach us how to grow in our Catholic faith, in knowledge and in service to God and

neighbor. He also was canonized a saint, and so Saint Thomas Aquinas shows us how to be saints on our path to holiness.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist today, let us be thankful to God for the opportunity that we have to receive this faith-based formation in our Catholic schools. May the gift of Christ's Body and Blood strengthen and nourish each of us individually so that we can contribute to being communities of faith, knowledge, and service here in our Catholic schools and as a Church as we all journey together toward our final destination of life with God for eternity in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Quincy Public Schools, Mission Statement, www.qps.org.