

**Homily for Mass with Effingham Deanery Catholic Schools  
In Celebration of Catholic Schools Week  
St. Anthony High School, Effingham**

**The Memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas  
January 28, 2015**

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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 good that we are here for this celebration during this week set aside to give thanks to God for the gift of Catholic education in our Catholic schools.

This past Sunday, I achieved a goal that I had set when I came here as a bishop four and a half years ago. My goal was to make it to each of the 129 parishes that make up the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. The parishes are the heart of the diocese, and as the shepherd of the diocese, it is my desire to get to know the people and for the people to get to know me.

Some of the larger parishes were easy to mark off the list as I visited them for the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation. Other parishes had other significant celebrations, such as a parish jubilee or, in a couple of

cases, the dedication of a church. The remainder of the parishes I visited for no special reason other than to have the opportunity to visit the parish and spend some getting to know them.

Our Catholic schools are also very important to the life of the diocese and I am always grateful for the opportunity to come to see the younger generation of Catholics that make up our diocese. So what does a bishop look for when he comes to visit a parish or a school? Well, I did not come to see how nice your buildings are, though I must say that everything is very nice here. I did not come to check on your test scores, to see how you compare to the rest of the schools in the area, although I am sure that you are doing well in this regard. I also did not come to see how many trophies or plaques you have won for your success in sports.

Instead, I take my cue from the Gospel passage where Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). First and foremost, when a bishop comes to a parish or a school, he looks for the presence of the Catholic **faith**. While academics, sports, and other extracurricular activities can be a good sign of the vitality of a Catholic school, all of these fall a distant second to the most important element of our Catholic faith being at the center of our identity and as a guiding

principle to everything that we do. If greater emphasis is given to something other than the Catholic faith in a Catholic school, then that school is not fully living up to its mission.

Catholic identity in a school is more than just having the external appearances of being Catholic, such as having crucifixes and other holy images displayed throughout the campus. These should be there, as they are visible reminders to us of our faith, but the faith needs to go deeper than that. Our Catholic identity should be seen in how we take the opportunity to pray on a daily basis, reminding us that He is close to us and that we should always be turning to Him for His guidance and protection.

Our schools should be places where we learn about Christ, not just as a person about whom we would study in a history class, but as somebody whom we get to know on a personal level as one who loves us and who wants to share His life with us. We also learn the many other wonderful teachings that He has given to us to help us in our lives.

We should expect to find an environment where everybody is treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve as children of God. Each student is not just being prepared to be successful in whatever lies ahead

for them in life, but you are being formed to be saints one day in Heaven. That is the greatest accomplishment we could ever hope for and, in the end, the only one that truly matters. It is for that reason that we place so much emphasis on our Catholic faith as being the most important part of who we are. I am certainly not suggesting that these other areas are unimportant, because they are, but they all find their true meaning and importance when viewed through the important lens of our Catholic faith.

This is something that your priests, principals, teachers, faculty, and staff need to take very seriously, because they have been entrusted with the great task of forming you in various areas. They must work hard to make possible an environment that strives for excellence in every area, all while doing so under the guidance of our Catholic faith, a task that is becoming increasingly difficult in the world in which we live.

The responsibility of maintaining a strong Catholic identity does not fall just on the adults. Each of you as students has a very important role to play in this regard. You can be taught all of the right things to know, say and do. You can also be given an environment which is very supportive of living your Catholic faith. But you have to make the choice to put into practice your Catholic faith - that cannot be done for you. By making this

conscious decision to let your lives be guided by your Catholic faith, you do far more than you realize in making your school one that is not just Catholic in name, but one in practice.

It might be helpful to do a sort of examination of conscience to see how well we are doing in letting our Catholic faith be at the center of our lives here at school. Let's take the classroom. Do you show respect to your teachers, recognizing that they have legitimate authority and that their rules should be followed without complaining or arguing? Are you honest in your schoolwork, doing your own work and not cheating off of others? Do you see your classmates as brothers and sisters in the Lord, or do you see them as rivals? Do you rejoice when somebody else does better than you on a test, or are you jealous? When you do better on a test, do you secretly rejoice in your heart because you will end up with a higher place in the class?

Living our Catholic faith in school goes beyond the classroom. Think about how you treat others when at lunch, in the halls, or at recess. Do you intentionally exclude others because they are different than you? Do you speak about others behind their backs, saying things that are not true, and even if they are true, things that can be harmful to their reputation?

Sports are another big area in the life of a school and also another opportunity to let our Catholic faith shine. Do you try to be the best teammate possible, not trying to grab all of the attention and glory for yourself? Do you rejoice when somebody else does well, or do you become jealous that you did not get to take the shot or get the playing time you think you deserved? As fans, are you respectful to the other team and their fans? Are you respectful to the referees and judges, giving them the benefit of the doubt and not always trying to blame them for things that do not go your way?

These are just a few things we should consider when thinking about how well we are living our faith. It may seem a little overwhelming, but it highlights how every aspect of our lives should be impacted by our faith. These are things that each and every one of us can and should be doing if we are truly striving to live our Catholic faith and are not things that we should expect others to do for us. If each of you makes the commitment to take ownership for your faith, then your Catholic schools will stand out as truly being Catholic. If you do not make that commitment, the entire school will suffer as a result of your actions and be Catholic in name only,

regardless of how hard the adults work in teaching you and providing a good environment in which to practice that faith.

Living our Catholic faith each day, both in and out of the classroom, is difficult. But if you make the firm decision to live your faith intentionally, you will not be disappointed. You will find that, contrary to popular belief, our faith does not limit your freedom, rather, it gives you greater freedom to live lives of authentic happiness, a happiness that will last, and not one that quickly fades away when we choose to take our own path. You will also find that your school will become a place where the Gospel is not just some nice idea, but where it is a way of life that fosters growth, respect, and love. You will truly be a community of disciples who are all traveling together, supporting one another on your pilgrimage toward your final destination of eternal life as opposed to a group of individuals only concerned about their own well-being and going through life according to their own path.

As we continue this Mass, we give thanks to God for the wonderful blessing that we have in our Catholic schools and the opportunities that they provide for us in forming us to be followers of Christ. Let us each ask God for the grace to take ownership of our faith and to live it with courage

in every aspect of our lives so that we can do our part in building up our schools and in building up the Kingdom of God as we all press on to the goal of everlasting life in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.