

**Homily for Mass in Celebration of Catholic Schools Week
Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church, Decatur**

February 2, 2016

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My brother priests and deacons, consecrated religious, dear principals and teachers, staff and volunteers, parents and students, brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here to celebrate this Mass during Catholic Schools Week, a time during which we give thanks to God for the gift of our Catholic schools through which the riches of our Catholic faith are handed on from generation to generation.

Our celebration of this week focused on Catholic education comes just as another celebration in the Church is coming to a close. I am speaking of the Year of Consecrated Life, which officially ends today on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. During this past year, we have celebrated how countless religious brothers and sisters have been and continue to be a source of great blessing to the life of the Church.

One of the aims set forth by Pope Francis, who called for this special year of celebrating consecrated religious life, was to “to look to the past with gratitude.”¹ When we consider the history of our country, we have

seen how the Lord has indeed been with us in a special way, providing for our needs, particularly through the great work and prayer of the many religious who have been a part of shaping our identity. In a particular way, we recall with gratitude the profound impact that religious have had on the history of Catholic education in this country and in our diocese.

Although the numbers of religious serving in our schools are not what they once were, we must acknowledge that we would not be where we are without their many years of faithful service, and for that, we give thanks to God for the foundation they helped to build, a foundation from which you all benefit in more ways than you could ever fully appreciate.

One of the many figures who contributed to this foundation of Catholic education in our country is Saint Katharine Drexel. Saint Katherine was born into one of the wealthiest families in the country. She and her sisters were raised with a solid Catholic formation, one which included many opportunities for serving the poor and underprivileged with the wealth that had been bestowed upon their family.

During his recent visit to Philadelphia, Pope Francis reflected on the life and example of Saint Katharine Drexel who had been born in that city. He recounted an incident that changed the direction of her life forever.

While on a trip to Europe, she had the opportunity to be in Rome and was granted an audience with the pope at the time, Pope Leo XIII. She pleaded with the pope to send more priests to serve the needs of the American Indians. Pope Francis recounted the response of Pope Leo in the following way:

the Pope – he was a very wise Pope! – asked her pointedly: “What about you? What are you going to do?” Those words changed Katharine’s life, because they reminded her that, in the end, every Christian man and woman, by virtue of baptism, has received a mission. Each one of us has to respond, as best we can, to the Lord’s call to build up his Body, the Church.²

Katharine went home and decided to dedicate her life to the service of the underprivileged as a religious sister. Having inherited a large sum of money following the death of her father, people were astonished at her decision to become a sister. One newspaper even printed the headline: “Miss Drexel Enters a Catholic Convent – Gives Up Seven Million.”³

An important part of the work to which Saint Katharine dedicated herself was education. She wanted to ensure that those who were unable to receive a Catholic education, either due to a lack of resources or unjust

discrimination, had the opportunity to do so. All of this happened because she was challenged to focus not just on what others could do to make a difference, but what she could do in order to respond to the needs of her time.

In reflecting on this challenge issued by Pope Leo XIII to Saint Katherine, Pope Francis called attention to the significance that this invitation was given to “a young person, a young woman with high ideals.” He then said the following:

How many young people in our parishes and schools have the same high ideals, generosity of spirit, and love for Christ and the Church! I ask you: Do we challenge them? Do we make space for them and help them to do their part? To find ways of sharing their enthusiasm and gifts with our communities, above all in works of mercy and concern for others? Do we share our own joy and enthusiasm in serving the Lord?⁴

This is where we see the great value of our Catholic schools, because they are a special place where you, dear young people, are challenged to live up to those high ideals that are so common in your hearts. It is here

that you are given a space in which to learn not just what you believe, but how to put it into practice by being of service to others.

Unfortunately, the message of our Catholic faith and the guidance on ways in which we live it out in our daily lives is not the only message to which you are exposed. In the culture in which we live, we are challenged with other questions which are often times at odds with our Catholic faith. Instead of asking "What am I going to do?", our culture encourages us to ask: "What am I going to get?" We can get too wrapped up in ourselves, and we miss the chance to act like Christ to that person.

Throughout our diocese we are emphasizing God's call to live stewardship and discipleship as a way of life. We are all stewards of God's creation entrusted to use the gifts He has given us for the benefit of others. God also calls us to be His disciples, that is, people who intentionally decide to follow Jesus. Our Catholic schools are places where we should be able to live in the way that Christ calls us to live. It is here, especially in our daily interactions with one another, that we are challenged with that question: "What are you going to do?" Will we choose to act as Christians? Or, will we choose to act as the culture encourages us to, by looking the

other way, focusing just on what concerns us, leaving the care of others to somebody else?

As I mentioned, we all have high ideals planted within our hearts, especially as young people. This can be observed simply by asking children what they want to do when they grow up. It's not uncommon to hear answers such as being a doctor, a firefighter, a police officer, a teacher, or a military officer. What is common among these professions? They all have to do with service to other people. Later on, people may choose similar professions because they promise a lot of money, or something personally exciting. Our Catholic faith constantly places before us those ideals of being of service to others. May our hearts always be open to following those ideals as the ones that lead to true happiness, true peace, and true fulfillment, as opposed to the worldly ideals which promise all of those things, but, in the end, always fail to live up to them.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with the same challenge that Pope Leo XIII made to Saint Katherine Drexel: "What about you? What are you going to do?" What are you going to do to live your Catholic faith more intentionally today? What are you going to do when you see

somebody else in need? Will you leave it for somebody else, or will you do something?

In a larger sense, what are you going to do with your life in order to continue to live those high ideals within your heart? For all of you young men, I ask you: What about you? Are you being called to be a priest? For all of you young women, I ask you: What about you? Are you being called to be a religious sister? Don't be too quick to answer 'no', but let yourself hear that question being asked of you, and don't be afraid to say 'yes' if your heart is telling you to do so. Also, don't fall into the trap of saying that someone else should do this. If everyone says "someone else," then someone becomes no one! Saying 'yes' to God in any situation, whether it be in our daily decisions and actions, or in the larger context of the vocation to which He is calling us, will always be a source of blessing, not just to us, but to others. This is what Saint Katharine Drexel did. This is what so many other saints have done throughout the history of the Church. This is what so many who have gone before us have done, making it possible for us to have the blessings that we so much enjoy. It is never too early for you to consider how you are being called to play a role in that unbroken mission begun by Jesus and continued for nearly two thousand

years by people just like you who have taken to heart that invitation: What about you? What are you going to do?

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter To All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, §1.

² Pope Francis, *Homily for Mass at Cathedral Basilica in Philadelphia*, 26 September 2015.

³ Foley OFM, Leonard, "St. Katherine Drexel", *Saint of the Day, Lives, Lessons, and Feast*, (revised by Pat McCloskey OFM) Franciscan Media.

⁴ *Ibid.*