

## LEARNING AND PRAYING TOGETHER: CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY

I love school—always have, always will. I say this unabashedly! When I retire (2033?!), I might even complete a License in Sacred Theology that hovers in Roman limbo! After all, learning is a **lifelong** endeavor. Now, I did not necessarily love everything about school— “Class, everyone will report to after-school detention unless those who (insert offense) turn themselves in!” Collective punishment for the innocent? Ouch! Still, there’s a **special place** in my heart for Catholic schools. Beginning with Kindergarten (1968-69), I was educated in Catholic schools for **22+ years**, all through my seminary studies (1989) and even a year studying in Rome. Those years are ingrained—and in the best sense of the word. Bad memories fade, the best (and funniest) ones remain! After transferring from Montessori School, mid-morning of my first day at Nativity School, Mrs. Carlson announced to us third graders: “Line up outside—it’s time for the **lavatory**.” “Wow,” I thought, “a science experiment on day one. Yippee!” Guess I learned a **new word** that day!

The Archdiocese’s **Annual Report on Catholic Education** was published last week. It is truly an impressive publication, replete with **research data** to back up the claims that Catholic schools are making a difference. I urge you to read it. In fall 2021, the **90 Catholic** elementary and high schools in the archdiocese reported a total enrollment of 27,023, up from 26,101 the year before. Since the pandemic began, total K-12 enrollment has **increased nearly 8%**, with increases of 20% in kindergarten, 23% in first grade and 19% in second grade. Approximately 75% of students enrolled are Catholic. There are some amazing stories of students (and entire families!) who have become Catholic due to their positive experiences in our schools. Undoubtedly, the enrollment **boost** was fueled significantly due to the **pandemic**. There is no shame in admitting this. The prospect of in-person learning in the **past two** academic years has attracted new students to Catholic schools.

The real question—will these new students **remain** after the pandemic subsides? So far, the answer appears overwhelmingly to be yes— 80% + stayed for this year. The retention rate is strong— 97% of Catholic high school students re-enroll and 90% in grade school. The biggest challenge facing Catholic schools is accessibility. The average K-8 Catholic school tuition of \$5000. Absent government subsidies or some version of school choice legislation, the sponsoring parishes and Catholic families bear the burden. The **Aim Higher Foundation (AHF)** provides scholarships to qualified families on a need basis in the amount of \$1000. That 20% assistance towards a year’s tuition can make the difference between attending and not attending. Last year, I donated the proceeds from the auction of my childhood **baseball card collection** to benefit AHF and would do it again in a heartbeat! There is so much joy in giving! Please review today’s bulletin insert – AHF would be a worthy Lenten almsgiving recipient.

In 2021, the State of Minnesota’s **public schools** struggled with respect to basic standards testing. It's difficult to replicate the benefits of in-person instruction. Statewide, just **44.3%** of students met or exceeded the basic standards in **both** math and reading. In 2019 (pre-pandemic), that figure was 55%, an 11% decrease. It will be interesting to see this year’s results. Urban schools took even more of a hit. Regardless, the pandemic was a devastating blow to the development of our city’s children. But even that only tells **half** the story. It is difficult to quantify the deleterious effects of limited socialization or increased **screen time** necessitated by remote learning. More than **2/3** of kids have their own **smartphone** by age 12. Staring at a screen 5 hours per day impacts one-on-one interaction, at school or work. I am so grateful Catholic schools were able to keep their doors open! They pivoted and found a safe way to maintain their mission.

Indeed, the same principle applies to remote working. At some point, the lack of interaction begins to wear thin on employees. Zoom meetings are unquestionably convenient— perhaps even **too convenient!** I’ve used them for lunch-hour marriage prep sessions when schedules make working couples time a challenge. I acknowledge its value— to a point. If we are addicted to watching YouTube videos, how do we regain our spiritual footing? As we rapidly approach the final days of Lent, we are invited to take stock of the centrality of our Catholic faith. The **paschal mystery** into which we soon immerse ourselves invigorates our souls and represents the *raison d’être* of our human existence. It is best experienced in person.

Archdiocesan guidelines that went into effect on April 1 allow for greater liturgical flexibility. Pastors are given broad discretion with our protocols. Steering a middle course, we respect personal decisions (e.g., masks) and provide social distancing options. We will continue to **livestream** our Masses, as so many shut-ins tune in and **benefit from** this option. It will remain for the time being. Yet, even our viewers do not consider it the same as being here— they know the difference. Call me “old school,” but both in **education** and **worship**, there is no substitute for being there! Our Catholic faith is incarnational. It’s meant to be experienced, seen, heard, tasted and touched— venerating the Cross on Good Friday is **powerful** beyond measure. May all feel safe and welcome worshipping in person in these special days ahead.

- Last week’s **Holy Hour** for **Ukraine** and Russia will surely go down as among the most powerful liturgical services in which I have participated during my service here. It was right up there with the 100th anniversary of the Fatima apparition in 2017. People from all over the Archdiocese attended. I underestimated the number who would attend—we **ran out** of liturgy guides. Hey, I was trying to save paper— but I blew it on this prediction! But no one seemed to mind.
- Wisdom from a 4th century bishop, **St. Gregory of Nazianzen**: “There should be **no delay** between your intention and your good deed. **Generosity** is the one thing that cannot admit of delay.” (*Oratio* 14, *De Pauperum amore*, 38. 40.) “It is necessary to remind oneself of God more frequently than one breathes.” (*Oratio* 27,4)
- History (and rhetoric) repeating itself? One century ago today—**April 3, 1922**— Joseph Stalin became leader of the Soviet Union, succeeding Vladimir Lenin. **Pray** for a **just peace** in Ukraine.
- Clerical **imbalance**? While North and South America comprise 48% of the world’s Catholics, they have only 29% of its priests. Conversely, just over 20% of the world’s Catholics live in Europe, yet 40% of the world’s priests minister there.
- Spring cleaning for the soul! While plenty of **confession times** will be available in the next two weeks, please don’t delay. Speaking of spring—my Minnesota **Twins** prediction is delayed until next Sunday— there is too little time to evaluate in the truncated spring training!
- I’m thrilled for 5-time NCAA champ BB coach **Mike Krzyzewski**! The Chicago area Catholic school alumnus made the **Final Four** in his **41st and last** season at Duke! “Let’s go, Duke!”

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector