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The gift of Catholic education

Bishop John Folda

Every January in the United States, the Church celebrates Catholic Schools Week, a weeklong observance of the singular contribution that Catholic schools make in the life of the Church. In Catholic schools across our nation, and in our own diocese, various activities are planned to help our young people, our teachers, and all the faithful to recognize the value of Catholic education.

During this past week, I was invited to celebrate a special Mass for all the students at St. Joseph School in Devils Lake, and I was deeply moved by the beautiful liturgy and the fervent participation of the students. The presence of so many parents, grandparents, and other members of the parish also testified to their commitment to their excellent parish school. I was also asked to celebrate an All Metro Schools Mass for the John Paul II Catholic Schools Network at Shanley-Sullivan School in Fargo. This, too, was a beautiful liturgy, attended not only by the middle and high school students, but by all the elementary students of Holy Spirit School and Nativity School in Fargo and St. Joseph School in Moorhead as well.

And finally, I was privileged to participate in the annual “Know Your Faith” tournament held at Shanley-Sullivan School, a statewide event that involves teams from all the Catholic high schools of North Dakota. In a raucous spirit of competition and surrounded by cheering crowds, the teams answered questions prepared by the religion teachers of all four schools, questions which would challenge many well-educated priests and bishops! I am proud to say that the team from Shanley won the championship, and it was amazing to see the level of enthusiasm and excitement that the contest generated among hundreds of high school students from across North Dakota.

These are just a few highlights of the week. And even though I could not be at every school during Catholic Schools Week, the parish schools at Wahpeton, Rugby, Grand Forks, Jamestown, Langdon and Valley City fill me with great gratitude as well. I look forward to visiting these schools very soon.

I was personally very blessed to receive a Catholic education in my own youth. I attended Catholic schools from first through 12th grades, and have always been grateful for the education I received. But more importantly, I am grateful for the formation in faith that was imparted during those crucial years. I also had the good fortune to teach grade school and high school religion as a young priest in my home diocese. So, it was with great joy that I discovered, upon my appointment as Bishop of Fargo, that our diocese has a long tradition of Catholic education and currently is blessed with excellent Catholic schools. Our schools regularly exceed national and state averages in academic achievement, and our students go on to higher education in very large numbers. Already I have heard great success stories from our graduates and their families, and I have no doubt that I will hear many more. It is well known by now that Trinity School, a new Catholic elementary school will soon break ground in West Fargo, so that the growing number of Catholic families in that area will also have access to the great gift of Catholic

education. Trinity School is planned to open and welcome students for the new school year in the fall of 2015.

The particular advantage enjoyed by our Catholic schools is their ability to teach the faith on a daily basis alongside the other subjects that make up the school curriculum. Religion is taught with the same rigor that one would expect to find in a math, science, English or history class. Moreover, the faith is integrated into every aspect of the school day, not only in classroom work, but in extracurricular activities, character formation, and certainly in the spiritual life which is central to all of our schools. In these schools, our young people learn that faith in God is at the heart of their total education and has an essential place in their everyday lives.

It is not widely known that the Second Vatican Council placed great emphasis on the role of Catholic schools. In its Decree on Catholic Education, the Council fathers said: "As for Catholic parents, this Council calls to mind their duty to entrust their children to Catholic schools when and where this is possible, to support such schools to the extent of their ability, and to work with them for the welfare of their children." The Council also "earnestly entreats pastors and all the faithful to spare no sacrifice in helping Catholic schools to achieve their purpose..." With these unambiguous words, the Council makes obvious not only the value, but also the priority of Catholic education in the life of the Church. And in our adherence to the Council's teaching, the Diocese of Fargo could do nothing other than to support and advance the system of Catholic education that we are blessed to have.

It is of course obvious to all, including myself, that not all of our Catholic young people have the opportunity to attend a Catholic school. The majority of our school-age children attend public schools, and a fair number of families choose to educate their children at home. In these cases, they rely on the religious education that is so diligently provided in our parishes and in our family homes. The Church's regard for these students and their families is also clear and unambiguous, and I hope to address their religious formation in this space in the very near future.

But for now, as the Diocese of Fargo marks Catholic Schools Week in its own diocesan schools, we as a diocesan family can only offer our admiration for the many fine teachers, administrators, staff, and benefactors of our Catholic schools in eastern North Dakota. They deserve our thanks for their commitment, and for the many sacrifices they make to teach and form the young people of our diocese. And, I must personally express my gratitude to the many parents and families who make it possible for their children to attend Catholic schools. Without the high level of parental involvement that our schools enjoy, they could not achieve the success we have seen for so many years.

And finally, the role of our priests must be acknowledged. Our parish priests exert great effort and energy not only to maintain but to advance the mission of our Catholic schools. In fact, Monsignor Jeffrey Wald, pastor of Holy Spirit Church in Fargo, has recently been honored by the National Catholic Education Association for his work and support of Catholic schools throughout his priesthood. We congratulate him, and in doing so we congratulate all of our pastors who are or have been responsible for Catholic schools in our diocese. Our schools would be unable to continue without the dedication and support of all our pastors who commit a significant amount of time and energy to the mission of Catholic education. There is no question

that our schools face huge challenges, and some of them struggle to carry on their important mission. But, with God's help and a spirit of solidarity, let us recommit ourselves to the support and flourishing of our Catholic schools in the Diocese of Fargo.