

Abide in Christ: Teaching as Jesus Did

By Archbishop John C. Wester

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As we approach Catholic Schools Week, I find myself reflecting on just how much a Catholic education means to me. My love for Catholic schools goes way back to 1958 when I accompanied my mother to visit Sr. Claire Maher, OP, the principal of Our Lady of Mercy grammar school in Daly City, CA. We had recently moved and Mom and Dad were eager to have me attend Catholic school. Despite the fact that this was a double grammar school with approximately 50 students in each class, there was no room for me at that time. As we drove home I remember my mother wiping her eyes and I asked her what was wrong. She told me how disappointed she was that there was no room for me. As it turns out, I was accepted the next year and spent the next five years at Our Lady of Mercy, followed by 12 years in the seminary, and several more years in Catholic graduate schools. There is no doubt that I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Catholic education, and in particular, to all those wonderful teachers who mentored me and taught me along the way. What is more, I taught in Catholic high school for eight years, followed by two years of ministry in the Catholic Superintendent's Office in San Francisco. Little wonder, then, that Catholic schools mean the world to me and I am deeply committed to their success, especially here in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe.

It is not just my personal connection with Catholic schools that motivates me to support them. Rather, in looking over the statistics and in talking to our splendid superintendent, Ms. Susan Murphy, it is immediately apparent that our Catholic schools are "delivering the goods." Here in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, we have a total of 4,074 students, of whom 91% are Roman Catholic. We are blessed to have 425 full-time teachers in our schools, which boast a graduation rate of 99% with 98% of our graduates participating in higher education. As you would expect, all of our schools are accredited. In addition to the core curriculum all schools offer music, art, physical education, technology, a sports program, and many other extracurricular activities. When it comes to grades and academic achievement, our schools are at the head of the class. St. Pius students score above the National and State level on their ACT's. Over 90% of our eighth grade students are at the mastery level of the New Mexico state standards. Our schools consistently score above the national average on the ACRE test which measures knowledge of the Catholic Faith. Equally important, research shows that Catholic school students develop more effective academic skills and score significantly above the national average on standardized tests.

While these statistics are truly noteworthy, I am especially impressed by our archdiocesan schools because of their commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, it is this commitment that makes them so successful. Our schools are communities of faith where each student is cherished and affirmed as a person made in the very image and likeness of God. These are communities that are Christ-centered and seek to provide the best spiritual and academic formation for each child's mind, soul and body. Catholic Schools provide opportunities for the reception of the sacraments, retreats, celebrations of the liturgical seasons and prayerful reflection on students' personal faith journeys. For the millennial generation (born after 1982) individuals are nearly eight times more likely to attend Mass one or more times per week than those adults who did not attend a Catholic school (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA, 2014)). In the United States, the Catholic school continues to be one

of the Church's most effective instruments for passing on the faith from one generation to the next (CARA, 2014).

For reasons relating to our Catholic faith and to excellence in education, there is clearly a strong case to be made for supporting our Catholic schools in this local Church. As you already know, it is not easy to maintain our schools in the current environment. There are many economic and demographic challenges that we face in keeping our schools open and thriving. That is why it is important for all of us to come together and support Catholic education in this archdiocese. The responsibility for maintaining, fostering and developing our Catholic schools does not belong solely to the local parish that has a school, nor to pastors of parishes with schools, nor to Catholic parents with school-aged children. Rather, this responsibility belongs to every parish, whether having a school or not, to every priest, whether a pastor with a school or not, and to every Catholic whether they have school-aged children or not. The responsibility for forming future Catholic leaders belongs to all Catholics as we seek to fulfill our baptismal commitment in promoting the faith, nurturing our children and contributing to the common good.

I encourage all Catholics to take a good look at our Catholic schools and to support them in any way possible. Your generous contribution to our scholarship programs is one very good way to do this. Another way is to support our schools by volunteering either as a teacher's aide or by helping students after school. Many of our Catholic retirees have wonderful skills and knowledge that they can share with our students. I have been impressed by those scientists here in New Mexico who in their retirement spend time teaching mathematics, science and technology to our students. These wonderful volunteers tell me that they get as much if not more out of what they do than what they give. Whether it is by giving of your time, talent or treasure, I invite all to seriously consider actively and intentionally supporting our Catholic schools. It means a lot to me personally and it means everything to our marvelous teachers, staff, students, family families and alumni. What is more, it means everything to our Church. I hope that you will consider how you can support our Catholic Schools and that you will be supportive of our efforts to "Teach as Jesus did."

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

Most Rev. John C. Wester

Archbishop of Santa Fe