



Most Reverend Robert W. Finn
Bishop
Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Diocesan Teacher Convocation

St. Therese Parish - Kansas City, Missouri
August 22, 2008

Dear friends in Christ,

Much of our time in the classroom we are bombarded with pressing questions that flow from the hearts of our students:

“Teacher: Is this important?”

“What time does this class end?”

“Will this be on the test?”

“Was that assignment really due today?”

“Can we go outside for class?”

Jesus Christ, the teacher, is approached in today’s Gospel. St. Matthew tips us off concerning the intention of the Pharisee - to test him. “Teacher, which commandment is the greatest?”

Our Lord responds first from what is probably the best known statement of the Jewish law, the great command in Deuteronomy, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.” He adds the second command – taken from a lesser known citation in Leviticus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In responding to the question, Jesus the teacher, gives his would-be student more than his money’s worth, more than he bargained for. He gives him the summary of all God’s law. He passes on to us the order of the whole godly life. His answer is central to the Gospel and is worth much meditation.

I recently heard an anecdote from the Kansas City-born humorist and writer, Calvin “Bud” Trillin. He shares something from his late wife, Alice. She developed a great love for disabled children and worked at a camp every summer she could get away.

“Alice wrote about one of the campers, a sunny little girl she called L. At camp, Alice had a tendency to gravitate toward the child who needed the most help, and L. was one of those. "Last summer, the camper I got closest to, L., was a magical child who was severely disabled," Alice wrote. "She had two genetic diseases, one which kept her from growing and one which kept her from digesting any food. She had to be fed through a tube at night and she had so much difficulty walking that I drove her around in a golf cart a lot....One day, when we were playing duck-duck-goose, I was sitting behind her and she asked me to hold her mail for her while she took her turn to be chased around the circle. It took her a while to make the circuit, and I had time to see that on top of the pile was a note from her mom. Then I did something truly awful, which I'm reluctant now to reveal. I decided to read that note. I simply had to know what this child's parents could have done to make her so spectacular, to make her the most optimistic, most enthusiastic, most hopeful human being I had ever encountered. I snuck a quick look at the note, and my eyes fell on this sentence: 'If God had given us all the children in the world to choose from, L., we would only have chose[n] you.' Before L. got back to her place in the circle, I showed the note to Bud, who was sitting next to me. 'Quick. Read this,' I whispered. 'It's the secret of life.'"

When our students ask us their questions – even those that show their boredom or their intention to hold off the necessary work of teaching and learning – even if they are testing us like the Pharisees in today’s Gospel, we may take our example and lead from the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ, who as the Gospel reveals was engaged in the full-time business of handing on “the secret of life.”

The mystery which Jesus came to reveal was the gift of a supreme and eternal love that has been extended to man from God. This love is so potent and life-giving that it is capable of creating us, holding us together in being, redeeming and forgiving us, and transforming us into the very children of the Father.

Jesus, the Scriptures make clear, called God “Abba – Father” – a term of great intimacy and endearment, and He told us that God is Our Father: I dare say, the kind of Father or parent that says – ‘If I had everyone in the world to choose from, I would have chosen only you.’

In the Gospel today, our Lord extends the command that will make us whole and entire: namely that we must allow ourselves to give all our heart, soul and mind to this love. Jesus would eventually illustrate this mystery of love in the total giving of Himself on the Cross in love of us whom He had determined to choose as His own.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. He did. He loves us still with all His heart, soul, mind – even to the destruction of His Body – even to the point of giving His Body and Blood to us as food to be consumed.

We don’t need to know much more than that. It is the “secret of life” and we must spend hours and hours – a whole lifetime - letting it seep into our hearts so that we can hand it on. The privilege and opportunity to do this is especially clear and well-provided for in the mission of the Catholic school.

Now, when we teach good science; when we show our students how multiplication works; the parts of a sentence; what lives in pond water, or how far it is to the nearest star, these things are good and necessary. This learning must happen in our schools and in every school.

However, in carrying out the mission of the Catholic school we have a greater challenge. When we examine, together with our students, the arts and sciences and skills, we are participating in the revelation of the truth as it is at work in the world around us – God’s order and plan, and the art of being human. We are delegated to impart nothing less than the mystery of living – and even the mystery of dying. And we are supplied with the sufficient matter – everything we need - to provide it to our students. We have excellent knowledge and skills, and we teach them in a manner second to none. We also have the Gospel, the Holy Eucharist and the Sacraments, the Communion of Saints, the life of virtue and grace, the apostolic succession focused in the Successor to Peter, the deposit of the Faith.

In the program of our Catholic schools we are witnesses to a dimension of life that is capable of transforming each of our students, and, collectively, the world. We are witnesses to Jesus

Christ and sharers in His own ministry of teaching. He kept revealing the truth in all its splendor. Don't be fooled - He was tough on untruth! He was death on sin. He rebuked what was wrong, and went to every length to bring back the erring sinner.

What a grace we have, my friends and fellow teachers, to be able to join Him in the unveiling the deep mysteries sought by every human heart. We have the freedom to profess our faith openly and break apart its meaning in every dimension of every study and program we undertake. We can humanize every task and sanctify each activity. To stop short of this is to give our students partial and frivolous answers - snack food rather than the full balanced meal - that cannot satisfy the hungers of their hearts.

So we will be Catholic schools! And you and I will be faith-filled stewards of a work that bears in its every authentic dimension the answer to the everlasting mystery – to the secret of life. I have said at other times that we must be unabashedly Catholic, unashamedly Catholic. Why? Because anything less is to be embarrassed about possessing the key to everlasting life. To stop short of handing over this truth – is to withhold a life-saving medicine from our own beloved children. Yes – Let us be Catholic schools!

Today is the Feast of the Queenship of Mary. One week after her glorious Assumption, body and soul into heaven, we mark her Coronation as our queen and mother. Let us go to her: the woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of stars.” (Rv 12:1) Mary, pray for us: our homes and communities and schools. Help us to be teachers who, like you, bring Jesus Christ and the mystery of His love to the world.