



Catholic Schools Week Mass
Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
February 3, 2012
Elmen Center, Augustana College

Catholic schools week each year gives us an opportunity to reflect on what and who makes Catholic schools so unique, and then thank God for our privilege of being here.

I particularly want to acknowledge the faculty and staff of the Sioux Falls Catholic School system and St. Agnes Catholic School, Vermillion, who with great love and sacrifice contribute so much to the quality of our schools. It is not always easy I know. A first grader looked sad and his teacher asked him why. He said he just learned that he had to stay in school until he was 18. "That's not so bad," replied his teacher, "I have to stay until I'm 65." Thank you for your loving and sacrificial service to our young people,

Let us also acknowledge the priests and deacons who play an essential role in Catholics schools, especially by offering the sacraments.

I also want to acknowledge the parents and families of the students who also with great love and sacrifice make it possible for their sons and daughters, their grandchildren to learn and grow here. Let us also thank the many volunteers, especially Board members, the benefactors and members of the parishes who also make this school system possible. Thank you to you all.

Thanks also to you students for your openness to the special environment Catholic schools provide. Every day after school the grandfather of another first grader would ask him what he learned at school that day. The little one grew tired of this and said to his grandfather, "don't ask me that anymore; when I learn something I will tell you." Each of you students would have something to tell every day.

The theme for Catholic Schools Week this year is: Catholic Schools: Faith, Academics, Service. In a way it is an expression of the Great Commandment: love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Faith: love God through prayer, Mass, devotions. Academics: love yourself in a healthy way by developing the total person, mind, body and soul. Service: love your neighbor through works of charity and social outreach. Catholics schools live that great commandment every day.

Most significant is that faith permeates academics and service. That separates you from both public and other private schools. Our Catholic faith is the essential ingredient. It is expressed in many ways especially by being true to and respectful of Church teachings, appropriate prayer forms and liturgical norms.

In 1980 the United States Supreme Court required the removal of the tablet of the Ten Commandments posted in a public school¹. Among the reasons given was: The ten commandments “are plainly religious and may induce children to read, meditate upon them and perhaps to venerate and to obey the commandments.” Of course that is true. Our nation was founded on Judeo-Christian ethos though the fact seems to be unknown in our day. We don’t have to be concerned about such fuzzy thinking here – or do we.

There is a serious matter I wish to bring to your attention which if allowed to stand will affect Catholic Schools. Several weeks ago Pope Benedict XVI addressed a group of Bishops from the United States and offered these troublesome words:

“. . . It is imperative that the entire Catholic community in the United States come to realize the grave threats to the Church’s public moral witness presented by a radical secularism which finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres. . . . Of particular concern are certain attempts being made to limit that most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion. Many of you have pointed out that concerted efforts have been made to deny the right of conscientious objection on the part of Catholic individuals and institutions with regard to cooperation in intrinsically evil practices. Others have spoken to me of a worrying tendency to reduce religious freedom to mere freedom of worship without guarantees of respect for freedom of conscience.”

The following day, the grave reality of His Holiness’ warning became evident when the United States Department of Health and Human Services issued a regulation that will effectively require all Catholic institutions that offer health insurance for their employees to provide and subsidize coverage for abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization and contraceptives, all contrary to Church teachings. In the past when federal regulations have been issued that violate one’s religious beliefs, an exception based on conscience was included. Despite numerous requests to do so in this case as well, the department chose to break historical precedent by departing from one of the core ambitions that led to our nation’s founding. Indeed the principle of freedom of conscience was trivialized by delaying the implementation for a year, which Cardinal-elect Timothy Dolan correctly noted as suggesting that “you have a year to figure out how to violate your consciences.” Therefore Catholic health care, educational and other institutions and organizations, including in South Dakota and including the Sioux Falls Catholic Schools, are being asked to choose to violate the Church’s moral teachings or to not provide health care to employees, which the Church’s social teachings call us to do. Neither is acceptable. If this stands what other offensive mandates will come next?

The Catholic Church is respectful of the essential role of government. However we cannot compromise on core, moral principles, nor cede the right to freedom of religion and conscience, nor

compromise under the heavy hand of the inappropriate exercise of government power. This moment reminds me of the wise words of St. Thomas More, who also confronted the improper exercise of government power and was martyred for exercising his conscience. He declared that he was “the king’s good servant but God’s first.” So must we be government’s good citizens but God’s servant first.

I have an assignment for all of you, especially you students. First, read history and gain an understanding of what happened in the past when the Catholic Church was persecuted and its destructive impact on society that lives without a moral compass. Note also those saints who had the courage to stand up for truth. Secondly, study the United States’ Constitution and the Founding Fathers explanation of why there is a First Amendment that protects freedom of religion and its free exercise. Thirdly, familiarize yourself with the doctrine of freedom of conscience in the theology of the Church that guided St. Thomas More and other martyrs over the centuries. In other words, understand what the Church teaches, which is what Jesus Christ teaches, then you will understand the seriousness of this moment in the history of our country.

During the Second World War a young soldier named Private Joseph Schultz serving in the then country of Yugoslavia. One day his name was called to join a patrol. As they carried their rifles over a hill not knowing their mission they encountered five men and three women lined up. As they got closer they surmised their mission was to execute these Yugoslavians. The leader barked, “ready,” then “aim.” Suddenly there was a thud as a rifle butt hit the ground. Private Schultz walked toward the Yugoslavians. His sergeant called after him and ordered him to come back but he pretended not to hear. Instead he joined hands with the eight innocent Yugoslavians. The sergeant yelled “fire.” Private Schultz died with those innocents. Found on his body was a quote from the writings of St. Paul: “Loves does not delight in evil but rejoices in the Truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres.”²

Catholic schools: Faith, Academics, Service. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Sometimes to love as Christ has loved us takes courage. But the reward in heaven will be great.

May the Blessed Mother, our mother, and St. Joseph, our patron, watch over and protect you all.

¹ – *Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980)

² – 1 Corinthians 13:6-7