

# OUR CATHOLIC MISSION

TRUTH AND FIDELITY IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

FALL 2023

## PASTORAL LEADERSHIP IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

- 
- The Bishop's Role in Discerning Catholic Identity
  - Father, Shepherd, and Teacher
  - Case Studies in Transforming Parish Schools





This goes back to the beginning of Common Core and a number of conversations I had with Denise Donohue where I was observing that we didn't have a solid Catholic alternative.

**I challenged The Cardinal Newman Society to help provide Superintendents with resources and they have responded spectacularly.**

**Fr. John Belmonte**  
Superintendent,  
Diocese of Venice, FL



## FALL 2023 ISSUE

# 'Remembering the Worth of Souls'

By Rev. Bjorn C. Lundberg

**T**his issue of *Our Catholic Mission* considers the special and necessary role of priests and bishops in Catholic education. It is both a timely reminder and a call to renewal.

For decades, Vatican documents have appropriately emphasized the lay vocation in Catholic education. This development is partially a response to the Second Vatican Council's call for lay evangelization. However, it is also a response to more radical changes: the exit of most women religious from parochial schools beginning in the 1960s, the decline of religious orders and their steadfast teaching in Catholic high schools and colleges, and increasingly limited catechesis and formation across much of Catholic education. Simultaneously, declining numbers of secular priests find less time and energy to devote to Catholic schools, which only increases the difficulty of keeping their doors open.

Parents serious about faithful Catholic education and their vocation to form their children have often felt that they are on their own, without sufficient assistance from the Church. This has spurred the growth of Catholic homeschooling, independent lay-run schools, and lay-led Newman Guide colleges, as well as the reform of many established Catholic schools and colleges.

Though a stellar witness, unfortunately, such families represent a practical minority in the Church. Most Catholic families—partially because of financial concerns but also often due to limited formation themselves—lack an appreciation of and commitment to Catholic education. Most families now place their

students in public schools and universities which are increasingly dangerous to their faith, morals, and intellectual and social development.

This, as Pope Benedict declared, is an "educational emergency." Our young people do not simply reject God—they hardly know Him. Pope Francis cries out: "One cannot know Jesus if one does not know the Church." A recommitment of priests and bishops to Catholic education, such as resulted from the great Baltimore Councils, is vital to a renewal of the Church.

"Practically speaking," wrote St. John Henry Newman, Catholic education "cannot fulfill its object duly... without the Church's assistance." Our clergy are necessary to Catholic education: to proclaim and clarify authentic Catholic doctrine, to provide the Sacraments, and to support the needs of Catholic parents.

Certainly, it is not a bad development that parents are rediscovering their primary vocation to educate their children. In essence, education is a lay activity—just like medicine, law, or commerce—that only reaches its fulfillment when united to Christ's Church. However, what was once a resource to support

parents—parochial schools, religious education programs and Catholic youth apostolates—was transformed into something different. Families got into an unfortunate but understandably bad habit of relying on nuns and priests for every aspect of Catholic education. Today, though, our clergy and religious can forge a new relationship of support and guidance for homeschoolers and independent schools, while also forming and accompanying lay educators in parish and diocesan schools and Catholic colleges.

All catechesis is transformational. Authentic education is carried out in a relationship. Inspired by Newman's episcopal motto, "Heart speaks to heart," may all the clergy and bishops embrace Catholic education and pray as our Saint did for his students, "May I engage in them, remembering that I am a minister of Christ, and have a commission to preach the Gospel, remembering the worth of souls, and that I shall have to answer for the opportunities given me of benefiting those who are under my care." **OCM**

**“OUR CLERGY ARE NECESSARY TO CATHOLIC EDUCATION: TO PROCLAIM AND CLARIFY AUTHENTIC CATHOLIC DOCTRINE, TO PROVIDE THE SACRAMENTS, AND TO SUPPORT THE NEEDS OF CATHOLIC PARENTS.”**

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Promoting and Defending Faithful Catholic Education

On the cover: Bishop Wack (pronounced "wok") of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee leads a sprint with the children of Trinity Catholic School in Tallahassee, FL. • Photo credit: Rachel Smith



# THE BISHOP'S ROLE IN DISCERNING CATHOLIC IDENTITY

BY DENISE DONOHUE, ED.D.

A bishop's oversight of Catholic education within his diocese—including schools, home schools, and colleges—is indispensable. His support and encouragement are also invaluable.

That's the experience of President Stephen Minnis, who has led an exciting renewal of faithful education and formation over the last two decades at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kan. Minnis says

Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City “has always been available to help me as the College faces significant issues, and his advice has been invaluable as we chart the course of the College.” He says it was the Archbishop's request that Benedictine review its compliance with Church teaching on Catholic education, create a culture of evangelization on campus, and give special attention to family and life issues.

It has always been so: the success of Catholic education depends on the active leadership of bishops. The bishops at the First (1852) and Second (1866) Plenary Councils of Baltimore deemed Catholic elementary schools vital to the protection of children from “the seeds of error or vice” and required every parish to erect a Catholic school. Decades earlier in 1789, Bishop John Carroll established Georgetown University as the first institution of Catholic higher education in the United States.

The bishops' responsibility to oversee Catholic schools and colleges is noted in many Vatican documents, and it is most clearly defined in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, St. John Paul II's *Ex corde Ecclesiae* (1990), and *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* (2022).

Catholic education is an apostolate of the Catholic Church founded by Christ to make disciples and to teach all that He commanded. In the formation of young people, the Church is a necessary partner with parents, who are a child's primary educators and require their bishops' guidance in matters of faith and morals. Especially in the last two centuries, the Church has assisted families by providing Catholic schools and colleges under the oversight of the local bishop and oftentimes religious orders. *Ex corde Ecclesiae* requires that Catholic college leaders report to their bishops: “Every Catholic University, without ceasing to be a University, has a relationship to the Church that is essential to its institutional identity” (27). And in *The Identity of the Catholic School* we read, “Indeed, the ‘ecclesial nature of Catholic schools, which is inscribed in the very heart of their identity as schools, is the reason for the institutional link they keep with the Church hierarchy’” (50).

It is the bishop's responsibility “to promote and assist” in the preservation and strengthening of Catholic identity in education. The American bishops typically leave the day-to-day oversight of parochial and diocesan schools to a superintendent or other administrator, but *The Identity of the Catholic School* reiterates the duty and responsibility of the bishop for this oversight, describing in detail specific



Magdalen College's Mass of the Holy Spirit. From left to right: Mr. John Klucinec, Dr. Mary Mumbach, Fr. Stephen Rocker, Bishop Peter Libasci, Deacon Karl Cooper, Dr. Ryan Messmore (president of Magdalen College), Dr. Erik van Versendaal

ic procedures and actions he must do to protect Catholic teaching.

A bishop should visit all the Catholic schools in his diocese “at least every five years, personally or, if he is legitimately impeded, through the coadjutor Bishop or the auxiliary or the Vicar general or episcopal Vicar... or some other presbyter,” the Vatican says. The document does not contemplate delegating this to a lay person or religious organization.

“THE SUCCESS OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION DEPENDS ON THE ACTIVE LEADERSHIP OF BISHOPS.”

The bishop can “appoint or at least approve teachers of religion for his diocese,” and he can also remove them or require they be removed, “if reasons of religion or morals

require it.” Since all teachers in diocesan schools are required to infuse the Catholic faith into their subjects, the bishop has authority to remove any of them “if conditions for his or her appointment are no longer met.” This generally means following the moral teachings of the Catholic Church and not creating public scandal. This is because teachers hold an “ecclesiastical *munus* and office,” which means “any post which by divine or ecclesiastical disposition is established in a stable manner to further a spiritual purpose” (Can. 145 §1).

The bishop also has the right and duty to intervene at the college level, if he believes the character of a Catholic college is compromised. Catholic theology professors—whether or not at a Catholic institution—are required to obtain the *mandatum* from their local bishop, acknowledging that they are teaching in full communion with the Catholic Church. *Ex corde Ecclesiae* requires a periodic review of a Catholic college's program and communication with the bishop, which for many of the Newman Guide colleges has resulted in a very productive relationship. President Ryan Messmore of Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts in Warner, N.H., tells us that each year the bishop comes “to celebrate our Mass of the Holy Spirit on the first day of classes and to hear the faculty and the president take the Oath of Fidelity to the Catholic Church.”

Schools operating independently from the diocese require a formal recognition by their bishop that the school can use the Catholic label. Even a school or college holding canonical status (a religious institute or juridic person) must request this approval from the local bishop, should they desire to open a school or college in a particular diocese, according to the Vatican's 2022 document on Catholic identity.

OCM

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The Most Reverend Joseph F. Naumann, Bishop of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, and Stephen Minnis, president of Benedictine College, preparing to lead the March For Life.



# Father, Shepherd, and Teacher

by Most Rev. Thomas A. Daly

The seasonal return to the sound of school bells ringing signals that another academic year is underway. This is a sound that stirs any number of feelings – joy, excitement, even a small bit of dread. But it's the undeniable herald calling Catholic educators back to their mission to form the students that God has providentially placed in their care in the wisdom and virtue that is their inheritance. As a former Catholic high school president, this mission remains of foremost importance to me, and as a bishop, that importance has only grown.

In any gathering of bishops, it doesn't take long for the conversation to turn to our Catholic schools. We know that our schools are *essential* to the exercise of our own episcopal ministry: to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ and to invite souls to embrace this. More than a century ago, our predecessors envisioned a Catholic school at every parish; while this dream was not fully realized, the first half of the 20th century saw a boom in the construction of Catholic schools.

It's worth spending a bit of time contemplating why the Church has placed such

a priority on Catholic schools. Certainly, the passing on of the faith is of primary concern, along with the development of intellectual capacities. Recent decades and the growth of disaffiliation might cast some doubt on how successfully we have done this. In another sense, the crisis of faith may be an opportunity for us to peel back layers of attempted reform and consider the fundamental question: *what is Catholic education?*

At its heart, Catholic education should be a process of integral formation that transmits what Pope St. John Paul II called a “convincing and coherent vision of life in the conviction that the truths contained in that vision liberate students in the most profound meaning of human freedom.” The school's task includes evangelization and catechesis, but before it can accomplish these, it must form the hearts and minds of its students with a Catholic imagination that allows the great catechetical truths to be welcomed and to take root.

It's also worth noting that this mission has a priority for the marginalized and the “least of these.” Not all children are born into families that are fully capable of educating and forming them; but as

children of God, they are entitled to it, and the Church embraces them and welcomes them into this place of formation, animated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, what role has a bishop to play in all of this? Not surprisingly, our role is quite critical. We are tasked with ensuring that Catholic schools are faithful and effective places of formation. Last year, the then-Congregation on Catholic Education issued an instruction on the nature of Catholic identity, *The Identity of a Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*. The document was something of a “preemptive strike” in encouraging resolutions of disputes surrounding schools, and it worked to achieve this by reiterating the nature of schools and the responsibilities of those overseeing them.

There are three images of bishops that speak to our role in ensuring the mission of our Catholic schools. They are: father, shepherd, and teacher.

## The Bishop as Father

In the *Identity of a Catholic School* document, the rights, responsibilities, and authority of the local bishop are articulated well, citing canon law and tradition. The Holy See recognizes the paternal nature of the office of bishop and says: “The Bishop is the father and pastor of the particular Church in its entirety. It is his task to discern and respect individual charisms, and to promote and coordinate them” [68].

The two words that jump out here are two important aspects of fatherhood: to *discern* and to *respect*. Good fathers exercise spiritual leadership by discerning the will of God in their families; so too bishops with regard to their dioceses, which includes the Catholic schools and the charisms associated with them. The natural fruit of the discernment of God's will is *respect*. This competence to organize the various charisms in the Church translates, among other things, into certain specific actions.

Of course, the work of a father is never just found in thought and prayer. In fact, thoughtful prayer should be reflected in the action of the bishop: taking the time to get to know his schools and those who teach and lead there and supporting the formation of Catholic school teachers, who hold a *munus* in the Church, by providing leadership and resources.

## The Bishop as Shepherd

The pastoral work of a bishop is manifested in the ongoing responsibility to watch over the schools in his care in the same way that a shepherd is vigilant in tending the flock. Good bishops assess threats to the flock, such as the rise of gender ideology and the encroachment of secularism, which threaten the souls of our children. When a threat is detected, a bishop must act forthrightly. He will often be condemned for this by a world that values tolerance over truth, but it remains his sacred responsibility.

As a young priest teaching high school, I had a Wire Fox Terrier named Rascal. Whenever my nieces and nephews would visit, they always played on the football field. Rascal would criss-cross the field, never getting too close to them. However, when one of them ventured off from the rest, Rascal would run toward them, barking as she leaped in the air. It was her way of alerting them that they needed to come back. This approach was in sharp contrast to a college friend's Border Collie, Jake. He had to be kept away from young kids because he would herd them in a circle, frequently bumping against them as if they were sheep.

As bishops, we must keep our eyes on the flock, without being overbearing and aggressive, which often leads to being hurtful. But when there is danger, we should not hesitate to sound the alarm in the strongest terms.

## The Bishop as Teacher

The office of bishop is threefold: as priest, prophet, and king. These roles correspond to three missions: to teach, to sanctify, and to govern. As a teacher, the bishop assumes chief responsibility for the teaching of the faith in his diocese. All those who teach in Catholic schools do so as an extension of the teaching authority of the bishop.

As Chief Teacher, it is our responsibility to educate our own people about the nature of a Catholic school. Like all good teachers, we must guide them in their own understanding of the nature of a Catholic school. In our world today, we see two fundamental errors at either extreme: the belief that a Catholic school is essentially a seminary and should serve only those whose sense of the faith has reached a particular level. On the other end, we have some who believe that Catholic schools are social service agencies, seeking only to deliver a service with no regard for the faith. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton provides some needed guidance here: “Our dear Savior was never in extremes.”

May Our Lord Jesus Christ bless and keep our Catholic schools in this 2023-2024 school year!

**MOST REV. THOMAS A. DALY,**  
bishop of the Diocese of Spokane, WA.,  
and chairman of the USCCB  
Committee on Catholic Education



“GOOD BISHOPS ASSESS THREATS TO THE FLOCK, SUCH AS THE RISE OF GENDER IDEOLOGY AND THE ENCROACHMENT OF SECULARISM, WHICH THREATEN THE SOULS OF OUR CHILDREN.”



# Priests Are Needed in Faithful Catholic Education

by Rev. Peter M.J. Stravinskis

It seems that most priests either do not know or fail to comprehend the critical importance of Catholic schools in the life of the Church, particularly as a vehicle of the new evangelization. At a bishops' meeting nearly a decade ago, Archbishop George Lucas and Bishop Daniel Flores lamented the fact that too many clerics over the past three decades have grown weary of the struggle to keep our schools viable, appealing, and accessible. "As Bishops, we must make every effort to assign pastors to parishes with schools who are champions of Catholic schools," Bishop Flores said.

At the Catholic Education Foundation (<https://catholiceducation.foundation>), we have responded with an annual seminar

to help seminarians, priests, and bishops be a powerful and energizing presence and influence in our schools. We also recently launched the Priestly Society of Christ Priest and Teacher, for priests engaged with Catholic high schools. In support of the effort, Mary Pat Donoghue, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Catholic Education, said, "In this apostolic age, our schools must vibrantly witness to the teachings of Christ in every aspect of the school's mission, from its curriculum and pedagogy to its culture and social elements. The guidance provided by a priest—an *alter Christus*—is critically important to this effort."

In this work, I have found that the majority of the "junior clergy" are most supportive of Catholic schools, but they do not know exactly what they can or should be doing to advance the cause. This is either because they did not attend Catholic schools themselves, or they went to Catholic schools in an era when clerical involvement was low or even non-existent.

In fact, a very interesting study surfaced in 2019 on the attitudes of seminarians toward our schools. It was both encouraging and disturbing: encouraging, in that—unlike the older generation of priests—they are quite supportive of Catholic schools; disturbing, in that they say they have been given no tools in the seminary to prepare them for any role in the schools.

## More Important than Ever

In one of St. John Henry Newman's lectures which became his famous *Idea of a University*, he makes the point that, without the presence of the "institutional" Church in the life of a Catholic university, the project is bound to lose its moorings. That is equally true of Catholic education at the elementary and secondary levels.

With the absence of priests, orthodoxy and Catholic identity waned in many places, leading to a further crisis in the schools. The mass exodus of women religious from the schools is yet another reason why the presence of priests is more important than ever.

The involvement of a priest, however, is not simply or even primarily that of a

watchdog. His involvement is needed to provide pastoral support for faculty and administration; to teach religion or other subjects according to his abilities; to be part of the lives of the students on the playground, in the cafeteria, and at social and athletic events; and, of course, for sacramental/liturgical services.

Not a few bishops—precipitously and very foolishly, in my opinion—withdrawn priests from high school work, yet the presence of priests there provided one of the most effective "recruitment" devices we ever had for priestly vocations. Dioceses that have kept priests there—or which are putting them back—know that.

A priest is faced with many challenges as he navigates the waters of the school apostolate. The first is that of regularly reminding his people that the Catholic school is an essential element of Catholic life—whether or not there is a parish school, whether or not individuals have children of school age—and, therefore, deserving wholehearted support, as the Code of Canon Law reminds us.

Second, he must say some potentially unpopular things. For instance, families need to be told that attendance at the government schools (the so-called "public" schools) places the souls of children in jeopardy—a point highlighted in a study five years ago, which documented that Catholic children in the state schools most often lose their faith in God and the Church as early as fourth grade, due to the type of science classes they experience. And when we begin to consider topics related to marriage, family, and sexuality, the need for Catholic schools becomes more obvious than ever before. The aggressive promotion of "gender theory" and "critical race theory" in government schools across our nation should give any intelligent parent reason to make the local Catholic school the educational home for one's children.

Third, the priest must ensure that no child is ever denied a Catholic education for want of financial resources.

Fourth, and this is often a very neuralgic piece of the whole project, he must help parents establish clear priorities: Is a winter vacation more important than a Catholic education for one's children?





## A Sainly Example

John Henry Newman was a newly minted Cardinal in 1879, when he was asked by Archbishop Roger Bede Vaughan of Sydney to lend his voice to the defense of Catholic schools in Australia. With great eloquence and insight, he wrote:

It is indeed the gravest of questions whether our people are to commence life with or without adequate instruction in those all-important truths which ought to colour all thought and to direct all action;—whether they are or are not to accept this visible world for their God and their all, its teaching as their only truth, and its prizes as their highest aims;—for, if they do not gain, when young, that sacred knowledge which comes to us from Revelation, when will they acquire it?

Indeed, if not “when young... when?”

Reflecting on his involvement in the early years of his Oratory School in an 1862 letter to the President of St. Patrick’s Seminary in Ireland, Newman acknowledges:

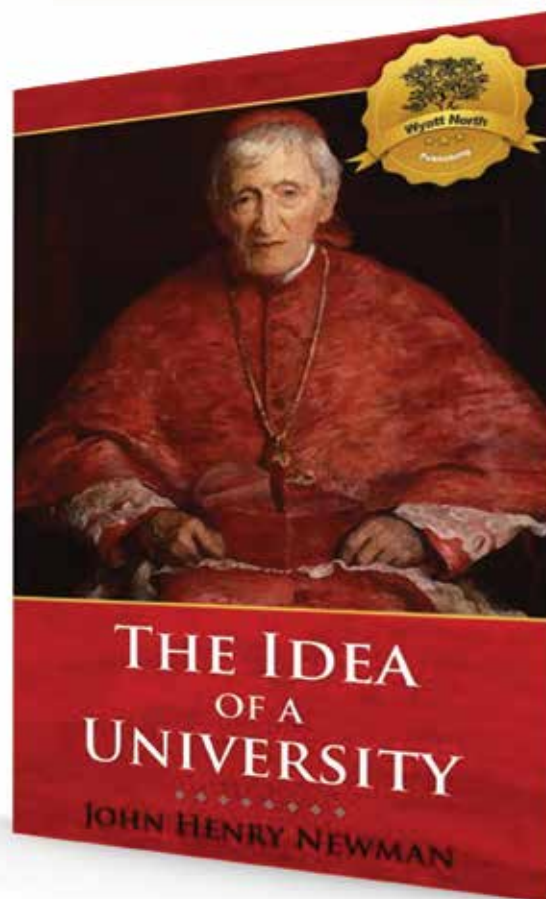
I am overworked with various kinds of mental labour, and I cannot do as much as I once could. Yet it would be most ungrateful to complain, even if I were seriously incommoded, for my present overwork arises from the very success of a school which I began here shortly after I retired from the [Irish] University. When we began it was a simple experiment, and lookers-on seemed to be surprised when they found we had in half a year a dozen; but at the end of our third year we now have seventy... As all other schools are increasing in number, it is a pleasant proof of the extension of Catholic education.

An “Old Boy” of the Oratory School, Arthur Hungerford Pollen, recalled:

At the Oratory we saw a good deal of the Cardinal. Nothing pleased him more than making friends with the boys, and the many opportu-

## PRIEST CHALLENGES:

- REMIND PEOPLE THAT THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL IS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF CATHOLIC LIFE.
- BE PREPARED TO SAY THINGS UNPOPULAR REGARDING THE THREATS OF PUBLIC SCHOOL.
- ENSURE NO CHILD IS EVER DENIED A CATHOLIC EDUCATION FOR WANT OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES.
- HELP PARENTS CLEARLY PRIORITIZE A CATHOLIC EDUCATION.



nities we had of personal contact with him made the friendship a real one. Of course, to us he was the greatest of heroes. . . . In the Latin plays which he had prepared for the boys to act he always took the keenest interest, insisting on the careful rendering of favourite passages, and himself giving hints in cases of histrionic difficulty. In the school chapel he from time to time appeared, giving a short address, and assisting at the afternoon service. It is curious that it should have been in connexion with these two widely different occupations that we should have seen most of him. It is, perhaps, characteristic of his disposition, in which playfulness and piety were so sweetly combined. (Cited in Wilfrid Meynell, *Cardinal Newman*, 86f.)

In 1879, a representative of the Oratory School Society observed in a letter to Newman:

Just twenty years ago you generously founded the Oratory School, and you have always cheerfully shared in the burden of toil and self-sacrifice which that act has entailed. We, on our part, gratefully acknowledge the benefits derived from the privilege of your personal influence and guidance after the wise and gentle way of St. Philip.

To which, Newman responded with a most priestly heart, placing the role of the priest in a Catholic school directly within one’s pastoral ministry and giving it preeminence: “No other department of the pastoral office requires such sustained attention and such unwearied services.”

St. John Henry, pray that our priests may imitate your selfless love and sacrifice on behalf of our beloved Catholic schools. **OCM**

### REV. PETER M.J. STRAVINSKAS

is president of the Catholic Education Foundation, which strives to preserve and expand Catholic elementary and secondary schools. He has served as an advisor to The Cardinal Newman Society and co-edited *Newman’s Idea of a University: The American Response* (Pine Beach, NJ: Newman House Press, 2002), a compilation of papers presented at a CNS conference in 2001.



# CASE STUDY I (NORTH CAROLINA); TRANSFORMING A PARISH SCHOOL

“Don’t give up on your parish schools. Schools are great challenges, but don’t be afraid to make the hard decisions,” urges Father Lucas Rossi, who serves as pastor of St. Michael’s Catholic Church and School in Gastonia, N.C., which has a PK-8 parish school.

“It’s worth it to go through the difficult times,” Fr. Rossi continues. “Remind yourself that it’s Jesus’s school. If He wants it to succeed, it will. In the varying challenges that come from year to year, keep your eyes fixed on Christ.”

Fr. Rossi has seen his fair share of challenging times at St. Michael’s and other Catholic schools that he has been affiliated with, yet he still loves being involved with the schools. “As long as Jesus Christ remains the center of everything we do, I’m confident that the blessings will be rich and abundant.”

## A ‘clarification of mission’

Fr. Rossi was ordained to the priesthood in the Diocese of Charlotte in 2010. He has served at Catholic churches in Winston-Salem, Charlotte, and Salisbury, N.C., and spent a brief time discerning a monastic vocation with the monks at

Belmont Abbey College, which is recognized in *The Newman Guide*. Since 2018, he has served as pastor of St. Michael’s Catholic Church and Parish in Gastonia, N.C., which has a PK-8 parish school.

St. Katharine Drexel was a generous benefactor of the school, and the Sisters of Mercy staffed it for many years. Initially started in a parishioner’s five-bedroom home, the school moved to its permanent campus in 1952. In 2018, the school received a large private donation and a grant from the Diocese of Charlotte to undergo a major renovation of its facilities.

But the physical renovation wasn’t the only change that the school was undergoing. There was also a deeper revitalization that was beginning to take place.

Fr. Rossi and a group of committed parents—many affiliated with Belmont Abbey College—set-out to clarify the mission of St. Michael’s Catholic School. He strongly desired for students to experience “wonder” and be “shaped by encountering the true, good, and beautiful” through an integrated curriculum. He believed that “every subject ought to point to God.”

“The school needed a clarification of mission. What do we offer? Was saying ‘We are a Catholic school’ enough to set us apart from other schools in our area? Not really,” said Fr. Rossi.

And so began a three-year transition of the school’s curriculum and training of its teachers to strengthen the school’s academics and Catholic identity. Unfortunately, the first year of the transition happened to coincide with the COVID pandemic in 2020. The school’s enrollment took a hit and dropped to about 85 students, from about 140 the prior year. Still, the efforts moved forward.

## Putting first things first

Despite initial low enrollment numbers, Fr. Rossi still felt the support of much of his staff and many Catholic families who desired strong Catholic education.

Together with the academic revival, Fr. Rossi embarked on a sacramental revitalization as well. He added both Confession and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament six times each week. Ahead of the 2022 academic year, he announced that the school day would begin with a daily 8:00 a.m. Mass.





Families from all over the Charlotte area began to hear about the changes happening at St. Michael's, and many were drawn to it. For some families, the addition of daily Mass was the final sign they needed to enroll at St. Michael's. In the 2022-23 school year, enrollment was impressively up to about 165 students.

"Jesus is our Master Teacher, and so He gets the first class of the day," Fr. Rossi smiled. "It's not about losing time; we're gaining the best ever at the feet of Christ. It feels right. I hope more Catholic schools do this."

Now, after a year of daily Masses to begin the school day, Fr. Rossi believes there's been a big impact on the culture of the school. The daily Mass has been "unbelievably transformative," he stated.

Fr. Rossi believes he has a much better relationship with students because he sees them at least at Mass every day. He also loves seeing many parents staying for Mass and attending with their children.

### Building strong families

"What we do at the school needs to be reinforced by the parents at home, otherwise our efforts are nearly pointless," says Fr. Rossi. "Our mission is to 'build strong families,' and that's why we're here."

One devotion encouraged among St. Michael's families is the First Friday devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On the first Friday of each month, homeschoolers are welcome to join the school community for Mass and Adoration, catechetical activities, and athletic activities led by student-athletes from Belmont Abbey College. Students are split into "households" named after Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, so that they can enjoy the day with students of different ages and families and "compete" against other households in friendly competitions.

Fr. Rossi enjoys being involved in First Friday activities, greeting the children on the playground, reading books in the classroom, and even bringing his "Sacristy Road Show" into the classroom.

The students—and the responsibility he feels as a spiritual father—have kept Fr. Rossi committed to the school, despite the challenges of the past three years. He's excited to help St. Michael's in continuing to "strive to be the best classical, Catholic school that St. Michael's can be."

"I don't think any saint would have ever said they're holy enough," he says. "You have to keep adapting year after year."

You have to keep enhancing what you're doing well and what you can do better."

Another bright light for St. Michael's was the addition of a new headmaster in 2023: Jacob Nolan, who previously served as assistant principal of Lumen Verum Academy in Boston and earned his master's in Theology at Franciscan University of Steubenville, which is recognized in *The Newman Guide*.

"We're very excited about the leadership he's bringing to the school," said Fr. Rossi, who sees the relationship between pastor and headmaster as a "key piece" in building up a faithful school. Nolan and Fr. Rossi will meet and pray together weekly, and both will strive to set an example of "living the faith on and off campus" as "spiritual leaders" for the community.

"The ultimate goal is Heaven," Fr. Rossi says. "We're not just here to impart knowledge and to give facts, but to help students encounter Christ through their education, their teachers." **OCM**

### KELLY SALOMON

is vice president of Newman Guide Programs for The Cardinal Newman Society. She and her husband Mike have three sons, and the oldest two attend St. Michael's Catholic School.



“WE’RE NOT JUST HERE TO IMPART KNOWLEDGE AND TO GIVE FACTS, BUT TO HELP STUDENTS ENCOUNTER CHRIST THROUGH THEIR EDUCATION, THEIR TEACHERS.”

# CASE STUDY II (SAN FRANCISCO); TRANSFORMING A PARISH SCHOOL

Father Joseph Illo believes that "Catholic schools, and support for Catholic homeschooling, are simply a primary responsibility of the clergy."



Father Joseph Illo

The San Francisco priest, ordained in 1991, became head chaplain at Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, Calif., in 2012. He later worked to renew a struggling elementary school at Star of the Sea Parish in San Francisco, navigated disagreements among parents about his efforts to increase the school's emphasis on Catholic formation and liberal arts, and re-founded the school as Stella Maris Academy—with extraordinary success.

We interviewed Father Illo about the challenges and blessings he has experienced as a priest devoted to Catholic education—and why clergy are so important to its mission.

"The parents are the primary educators," Father affirms, "but they cannot do their job without the support of the clergy, and I mean clergy who are faithful to the Tradition. The single most determinative factor in priestly vocations is the Catholic parish school. Most of our seminarians and priests have attended Catholic schools, both parish and private, or had excellent homeschooling, supported by their clergy."

To that, Father adds a warning: "It is because the clergy have largely distanced themselves from the hard work of maintaining the Catholic identity of our schools that they have become mostly secularized."

"Without the priest and the bishop," he says, "the Catholic school—whether a homeschool, or parish school, or independent school—will sooner or later devolve into a secular enterprise. We cannot live without the sacraments and authentic doctrine, which are properly the responsibility of the priests and bishops."

Dr. Gavin Colvert, head of school at Stella Maris Academy, says Father Illo's role has been essential to the school's success. "Persons are composed of both matter and spirit. Every genuinely Catholic educational program must therefore build up the love of God and neighbor at the same time as it fosters the growth

of the intellect." This requires "the integral involvement of our priests in the life of the school."

### Priest and King

When Father Illo arrived as pastor of Star of the Sea Parish in 2014, the parochial school had been in operation more than 100 years. But in February 2018, Father recalls, San Francisco Archdiocesan Superintendent Pam Lyons asked him to consider transitioning the school to a more "classical," liberal arts curriculum. The faculty seemed supportive when Father took all of them to a seminar explaining the approach in 2019, but he quickly ran into opposition from a vocal minority of parents and some fellow clergy.





“The priest serves a twofold role in any parish or school as both business manager and fatherly pastor,” Father Illo says. “In theological language, he is both ‘king’ and ‘priest,’ as Christ was ‘priest, prophet, and king.’ It is a delicate balance, and many folks will become angry at the pastor for making business/curriculum/managerial decisions not to their liking.”

That, sadly, is what happened at Star of the Sea, where disgruntled parents led and drove other families out of the school. It closed for two years, but in 2021—with much “time, money, and prayer” from Father and his dedicated parishioners—he was able to launch the renamed Stella Maris Academy. It was “all from God’s grace,” Father says, especially during a COVID pandemic year.

The Academy has been a wonderful success, with 62 students in its third year and lauds from Catholic media and other Catholics in San Francisco. Father tells of the first day of the Academy, when a little girl gave him a shiny red apple, a sign of the pastor’s key role in parochial education.

“Her family had despaired of both public and Catholic schools in San Francisco, and then this Catholic classical academy opened,” Father recalls. “It has transformed their family and their faith, and the apple little Paloma offered me made me feel like a teacher. ...I realized that I am a teacher too, and a necessary part of my school’s faculty.”

Asked how he navigated through the difficulties to such a wonderful result, Father says the pastor sometimes has to make unpopular decisions and then “soothe the anger of his disaffected sheep, to help them as a gentle father to accept what they must accept in life.”

“The priest is uniquely situated—not least also because of his celibacy, which gives him a universal love and appeal, as he does not have a spouse or children of his own and so is spouse and father to all—to fully exercise both roles” of priest and leader of the parish. “So he

can be firm in upholding the mission, but gentle and conciliatory in respecting the parents’ rights and sensitivities.”

Of course, Father notes, the priest’s most important role in Catholic education is providing “the sacraments and the authentic Word of God.”

“John Paul II, in his letter *Novo millennio inuente*, emphasizes the ‘primacy of grace’ along with the primacy of the sacraments, prayer, and other spiritual goods in any Catholic initiative. That is abundantly true with Catholic education.”



Dr. Colvert says Father Illo set the right tone by finding ways to provide the sacraments during COVID, followed by a new school. “Father Illo’s faithfulness and single-minded determination to achieve this goal, with God’s grace, many prayers, and the help of a dedicated team are the principal reasons why Stella Maris Academy was able to rise from its historic roots and begin again the sacred work of Catholic education.”

The Academy’s faculty and staff “enter into partnership with families to assist parents in their responsibility of raising children,” Colvert says. “While we can articulate principles and best practices for parochial schools, ultimately each day calls forth wisdom and grace in the moment. Informally, this requires a deep relationship of trust between the pastor

and the principal. The head of school must trust the vision of the pastor, and the pastor must trust the dedication and sound judgment of the head of school.”

For Colvert and Father Illo, this goes beyond formal meetings. “We’ve also gone on hikes together, entered into prayer together, broken bread together, and the like,” Colvert says. Such a relationship “is essential to building the mutual trust that is needed to overcome obstacles and achieve growth.”

### Campus Ministry

Prior to becoming pastor at Star of the Sea, Father led three other chaplains serving students at Thomas Aquinas College, a highly-ranked Great Books college with a fully integrated Catholic curriculum. It also has one of the most beautiful chapels in America, where students frequently attend Mass and Confession.

From the very start of the lay-led college, Father recalls, “priests and bishops were integral in its development.” In its first years, these included two priests on the original faculty and valuable assistance from Archbishop Thomas McGucken of San Francisco, Cardinal James McIntyre of Los Angeles, and Msgr. Norman McFarland (who eventually became bishop of Orange, Calif.).

The faithful Newman Guide college considers the sacraments “essential to Catholic college education,” Father says. “TAC is built on the premise that all science and knowledge are fundamentally discovered through grace, both through God’s gift of the natural intellect and also by divine revelation,” he explains. “Original sin darkens the intellect and weakens the will, so priests are essential to education in helping remedy these defects to our intellect and will through the sacraments and the Word of God.”

Father Illo says he and his chaplains provided four Masses a day, plus Confessions before and after Mass and daily devotions including Adoration, Rosary, and Liturgy of the Hours.

“We ended the students’ day at 10 p.m. every night with night prayer in their dorms, as well serving as supernatural fathers to them with in natural activities such as camping, hiking, kayaking, cycling, basketball, volleyball, football, etc.,” Father recalls. But most of the time was devoted to individual spiritual direction, “assisting students in their sanctification and especially (at that age) to enter their vocations” to the priesthood, religious life, and especially marriage.

Although the College is a lay-governed institution, Father Illo says the chaplains “had a good deal of input into Catholic activities and identity,” and administrators “depended on the initiative and leadership of the clergy to a large degree.”

“They were always happy to support our ideas,” Father says. One of these was to have a statue of Mary added to the sanctuary of Our Lady Chapel, which the College readily supported.

And even today, years after his chaplaincy at Thomas Aquinas College, Father Illo continues to minister to alumni. “My fatherhood continues with many students, whose marriages I continue to witness and whose children I baptize,” Father says. He is thus able to witness to the life-long impact of faithful education and ongoing Catholic formation celebrated by our Newman Guide program. **OCM**

**PATRICK REILLY**  
president and founder of  
The Cardinal Newman Society.



“THE SINGLE MOST DETERMINATIVE FACTOR IN PRIESTLY VOCATIONS IS THE CATHOLIC PARISH SCHOOL.”



BACKGROUND IMAGE: PHOTO BY JANNIE SPRATT ON UNKUNSPASH





Promoting and Defending Faithful Catholic Education

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## Join the Task Force for Eucharistic Education

A recent survey showed that nearly seven-in-ten Catholics believe that the bread and wine used at Mass are mere symbols of the body and blood of Jesus. However, the survey also found that most of those same Catholics do not know what the Catholic Church teaches regarding transubstantiation.

This is why The Cardinal Newman Society is launching the Task Force for Eucharistic Education—an initiative to help solicit, identify, and promote inspiring efforts by Catholic schools, homeschools, colleges, and individuals to help revive Eucharistic understanding and devotion.

We want you to participate! All you have to do is visit [www.eucharisticeducation.org](http://www.eucharisticeducation.org) and share the projects you or your school are engaging in, including academic conferences, research, publications, formative student programs, liturgies, prayer, videos, or any other ideas.

If you have any questions, contact Bob Laird at 703-367-0333 x103 or [blaird@cardinalnewmansociety.org](mailto:blaird@cardinalnewmansociety.org)

