The Catholic school supports parents in their role and assists them in the God-given responsibility they have to raise and educate their children in the Catholic faith.
–Bishop John Folda

Encountering Christ in Catholic schools

I recently met a man who grew up in a Muslim family in Africa. He begged his father, who was a Muslim imam, to attend the nearby Catholic school, and received permission. The young lad was fascinated by the Eucharist and soon wished to go to Holy Communion with his classmates. He begged to be baptized, and at that point, his father and family basically disowned him, but he persevered. Some years later, he felt the call to become a priest, and years later still, he was called by the Pope to be a bishop. He then had the beautiful privilege of baptizing his own father and family, who wished to join him in the Catholic faith. Archbishop Thomas Msusa of Malawi credits his faith and priestly vocation, as well as the conversion of his family, to the profound impact of his Catholic education. It all started when he was allowed to attend a Catholic school. We should never forget the grace of God and the power of our witness to transform lives. Catholic schools are a key place where that grace and transformation can happen.

From Jan. 30 to Feb. 5, the Church in the United States will celebrate Catholic Schools Week, an annual occasion to give thanks for the important role of Catholic schools in the lives of our families and in the life of the Church. Since its earliest days, the Church in the United States has recognized the value of education for our children, but especially an education that is clearly rooted in our Catholic faith. Jesus Christ is the first and preeminent teacher in every Catholic school, where we are free to acknowledge God as the author of all truth. Young people learn that faith and reason go hand in hand, and one supports the other. Daily prayer and regular celebration of the sacraments allow our students and faculty members to encounter Christ throughout the school day, and we discover that religion is not just for Sundays. Students are formed in virtue, and they receive an education that matches or exceeds state and national standards. In a Catholic school, everyone knows that a child has an immortal soul made for heaven. We are forming our young people for lives and vocations here on earth but also for a life with God in eternity.

One of the biggest advocates for Catholic education in the Diocese of Fargo was Monsignor Jeffrey Wald. Monsignor Wald said he was a “convert” to the value of Catholic education because he had never personally attended a Catholic school before he went to the seminary. In each of his priestly assignments, he was able to see firsthand the good things that can happen in the lives of our children who attend Catholic schools. Certainly there is the obvious benefit of passing along the faith and a good, sound education to our young people, but Monsignor Wald was convinced that Catholic schools also have a positive impact on the entire family. The presence of a child in a Catholic school can have a ripple effect with parents, brothers and sisters, and grandparents. A Catholic school can also be a blessing to the entire parish community.

The Church teaches that parents are the first teachers of their own children, and that remains true no matter where a child is educated. No school can supplant the paramount role of a parent. But our Catholic schools strive to partner with our parents to provide the best education possible for their children, not only in the faith but in all subjects. The Catholic school supports parents in their role and assists them in the God-given responsibility they have to raise and educate their children in the Catholic faith. Cooperating with parents, our Catholic school educators work every day to help our children grow in knowledge, wisdom, and grace. Of course, no Catholic school is perfect, and there are always ways to grow and improve in carrying out the mission of Catholic education. But our schools are dedicated to living the Gospel and opening the doors of understanding to every child within its walls. To quote the theme for this year’s Catholic Schools Week, they are places of “faith, excellence, and service.”

As we celebrate Catholic Schools Week this year, I want to thank those who make it possible to carry on the mission of Catholic school education in the Diocese of Fargo. First, I thank the parents for their indispensable participation in the daily work of teaching their children. Without the participation of parents, our Catholic schools could not do what they do. I also want to thank our schoolteachers,
administrators, and staff members who dedicate themselves so generously to forming and educating our children. They make great sacrifices to serve in our schools, and we are grateful for their good work and their commitment. I thank our priests, who take an active role in our schools and make Christ present through their pastoral ministry. And I thank the many benefactors and volunteers who give their time, talent, and treasure to support the mission of Catholic education. It’s hard to imagine whether our schools would even exist without the contributions of so many to this important apostolate of the Church.

I’m well aware that not all families have access to a Catholic school in the Diocese of Fargo. To those who do, I hope you will consider the value of a Catholic school education for your children. The blessings will be abundant, and the power to transform lives will be there for every student who walks through the doors.