

One Saturday morning, a few years ago, several members of my high school graduating class met at a diner in Albany for breakfast. We had not seen one another since the day of our graduation in 1972, many years ago. While carrying on a conversation with one of my classmates, Don, currently a security guard, at Emma Willard School, another classmate approached us. I said to Don, "Mark R. is approaching us". Don seemed puzzled. He said, ""And just who is Mark R?" Mark overheard his comment. He was genuinely surprised that one of his former classmates could not remember him. It bothered him.

To be remembered by one of your former classmates is a blessing. Why? The answer is because your classmates share your memories of the years you studied together. They are familiar with all the stories. Some of them are humorous. Others may be sad as when you received a bad grade on a test and your classmates learned about it.

Today you say goodbye to your classmates. Soon, you will be enrolled in one of our area middle schools.

Although the education you received here is of great importance, so, too, are the friendships that you made here over the past several years. As you grow older and reach my age, you'll likely come to appreciate why relationships are even more essential than the good grades you earned here in the classroom.

And, of course, the most important relationship is with Jesus Christ. You will remember the many masses offered on Thursday mornings. You may even recall the prayer, the morning offering, recited at the morning assembly. What about your first communion and first confession? And then there is the annual Christmas concert and the nativity play? Think back to the times you served at the altar and proclaimed the word of God at mass.

We may forget many of the things we were taught in years past, but it is highly unlikely you will ever forget most of the names you heard so often when your teacher took attendance the beginning of the school day.

And let us not forget your teachers. To this day, I have fond memories of my teachers at Saint Teresa of Avila Grammar school in Albany. How overjoyed am I when I see one of my former teachers after many years. I am quick to share my memories with her.

Let me share with you one unforgettable memory of my fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Venter. She was teaching the class when, unexpectedly, another nun, rushed into our classroom and announced that the President of the United States had been shot in the city of Dallas.

I hope and pray that your memory, a precious gift of the Lord, never fails you. As you leave church this evening keep in mind the words of Jesus from today's gospel reading: "Go home to your family and make it clear to them how much the Lord in his mercy has done for you" (Mk. 5:19). You have been blest because your parents wisely enrolled you in our school.

Lastly, remember that you are loved by your parents and teachers, your principal and the pastor of this church.

On my right is a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is a reminder of how much Jesus loves you and me. As we read in John's gospel, Jesus loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end" (Jn. 13:1). The challenge you face in middle school and beyond is to love others as Jesus loves you.

This is a day of joy and celebration. I encourage you to smile, laugh and be joyful. You have reached a milestone in your young life.

In closing, I make one last appeal:

Vaya con Dios (Go with God).

Congratulations, graduates.