

September 12, 2019

Wings Event Center

10:30 a.m.

**Diocesan Back to School Mass: “Together in Faith”***(Readings: Jer.1:4-10; Col.3:12-17; Lk.6:27-38**Memorial Feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary)*

My brother priests and deacons, and all of you—sisters and brothers in Christ—just look around you! This is so cool! How many of you have been to this Stadium---Wings Center---for a Hockey Game, or some other sporting event? But, just look at us now—this huge place has been transformed into a sacred space—not just because of how beautifully everything has been prepared, so much so that when you first see it, you feel like you’re in a Cathedral; but this space is sacred because of us—because of all of you!

Welcome to all parents/grandparents/family members of our students; welcome to our diocesan schools office and other pastoral center staff; welcome to all our very competent administrators and principals; welcome to all our great, dedicated and loving teachers; and most of all, welcome to all of our students—welcome back to school for this 2019-20 academic year! We haven’t completed the first month of this new school year, and how great that we can all gather together—from Allegan County and Barry County; from Berrien, Cass, St. Joseph and Branch Counties; from Van Buren and Calhoun County; and from right here in Kalamazoo County---We have all gathered “**Together in Faith**”, the theme of this first-ever all Catholic school Mass! We are thrilled to have every one of our 21 Catholic schools, and a large number of our Catholic home school community, all together in one place, to do what? To sing God’s praises, and to give thanks for the great gift that our Catholic education is for this generation of our young Catholic children and youth.

That’s what we heard in our Psalm Response: “*Let everything that breathes, praise the Lord.*” That Psalm we prayed together told us to “*praise God with the trumpet, with lyre and harp, with timbrel and dance, with strings and pipes; with cymbals and drums*”—and we’re grateful that we have our band here composed of 125 members from our 3 Catholic High Schools: Hackett Catholic Prep from just down the road, St. Philip, Battle Creek and LMC in St. Joseph to help us do that.

We also heard St. Paul tell us in today's Second Reading that we should be "*singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God*"—and we're thrilled to have this great choir, made up of 125 students from 7 of our schools—helping us all to do that! Yes, we're here to sing God's praises.

But we've also come "***Together in Faith***" to ask God's blessings upon every one of you, so that you'll have a successful school year; that you'll be blessed in every way as you grow in learning, and so that your mind can come to deeper understanding of all the important things that you need to know, whether you're just beginning in pre-school, elementary grades; or if you've advanced to middle school or high school. We pray for the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit to help you all to grow in wisdom, knowledge, and understanding that will help you to advance in all that you need to know to live in this world.

What's so exciting about coming together from all over the Diocese for this special Mass is that we can see how huge the impact of our Catholic school education is! That's the significance of these 21 Candles burning brightly here before us, each identified with the logo of one of our Catholic schools. Each of our schools brings the light of Christ to a world that really needs to see the Love of Jesus reflected in each and every one of you. It's wonderful to have that strong sense of community with your own classmates, and within your own school; but here, we can see that we're a part of something huge! And that's important so that we can see that no one of our schools, and no individual student, is "on their own"; all of us here love Jesus; all of us here value our Catholic faith; all of us here want to grow in our understanding of God and God's ways in our lives.

But there's something else that's important for us to remember. Even as we look around us and are impressed by the hugeness of our Catholic schools, we also need to remember that when God looks at us gathered here—He's not only pleased with all of us; God is pleased with each of us! Our loving God loves each and every one of you with a special and unique love. As we heard this morning's First Reading, God spoke to the young person, Jeremiah, and what God told him, God also says to each and every one of you: "*Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I dedicated you.*"

God has a Plan for each of us. Another way to put that is to say: each and every one of us has something special and unique to contribute to the world that will make it better, if we allow God to guide us. And before we can offer any excuses, like Jeremiah evidently was trying to do, God says to each of us: "*Do not*

*come up with excuses, such as I am too young: To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid!"*

Here in our Catholic schools, we learn about God's plan, and we come to an understanding of what part in that Plan each of you is being asked to fulfill.

Once again, that is why our Catholic schools, and our Catholic Homeschooling programs, are so special. Our schools provide a strong environment of faith; our schools teach knowledge, rooted in our knowledge of God and God's ways; our schools foster a sense of compassion and a desire to be of service to others in the example of Jesus. Our Schools are **dynamic** in our approach, **distinctive** in the quality and content of our curricula, and **devoted** in the extra care, attention and commitment to our students and your education.

I like to look at it this way. Every good school, Catholic or not, teach their students a lot of content, or we might call it "know how." All good schools teach students facts, and share important information about history, literature, math, science, and social policy, and prepares students on how to live in this world.

Catholic Schools teach Know-how, but also, we teach "Know-why!" We not only teach facts, but the reasons why, from God's perspective, we need to live in certain ways. We come to understand why Jesus, as we heard in today's Gospel passage, teaches us something very different than the rest of the world teaches. He taught us "to do good....to lend.....to forgive....to be merciful....and most of all, to love your enemies." Jesus wraps it all up in what we sometimes call "the golden rule" when He teaches: "*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*" Why? Because that is how God treats us: He does good for us even when we don't deserve it; He forgives us when we sin; He is merciful to us even before we ask for it; and He loves us unconditionally, even if we turn our back on Him. Our Catholic schools teach us to know-why, not just so that we can live in this world, but so that we can keep our eyes always focused on the fact that we want to be ready to live in the World to come, with God, forever in Heaven.

And so that we can "know-why", we have to "know-who!"—and the Who, of course, is Jesus! Our Catholic Schools, in dynamic, distinctive and devoted ways, teach us who Jesus is, and how much He Loves us, and that is why we come together here in faith, to celebrate this Holy Mass—to hear God's word, and to be nourished by Jesus Himself in the Eucharist—so that we can let the light of Christ shine thru us!

This is a wonderful moment in the life of our Catholic Schools—to have us all come “Together in Faith” to have this grand celebration. But after Mass, and after Lunch, you’ll return to your individual Schools, and that is where you’ll learn the “know-how,” the “know-why,” and the “know WHO” throughout the rest of this school year.

May the Holy Spirit bestow His many Gifts upon each of us. And may our dear Blessed Mother, whose Most Holy Name we celebrate today with great reverence as the Mother of Jesus, and the Mother of the Church, may She intercede for each of us, and keep us always close to her Son, and our Lord, Jesus Christ!

God bless you, now and always!