

FROM YOUR DIOCESE

FEBRUARY 2024

FROM BISHOP RICHARD G. HENNING

In November, I had the opportunity to attend a meeting with Governor Daniel McKee and his staff concerning his Learn365RI initiative. The Governor explained his deep concern for the young people of our state and outlined the post-covid challenges for education. While I was aware of these challenges in general, I was still shocked by the data the Governor presented. Far too many of the young people in our state have not fully returned to school following the pandemic. The rates of chronic absenteeism are much too high in many districts, particularly in urban and poor neighborhoods. The Governor explained his efforts to reduce absenteeism and the significant progress to date. He also explained his Learn365RI initiative to involve the wider community and provide young people with broader opportunities for learning year-round.

I thanked Governor McKee for his leadership in identifying this critical need and striving to improve the odds for our young people and for our wonderful State of Rhode Island. I fully support his efforts to convince families and students to give priority to their education. I applaud the Governor's understanding of the need to make the entire community aware of the gift of our young people and his invitation for churches and community organizations to assist in creative ways. I will be looking for ways that the Diocese of Providence and our parishes might assist these worthy efforts.

As we get further from the pandemic crisis that gripped the world in 2020, I hope that we are willing to examine our choices and learn from them. I am sorry to say that I think that the lockdown efforts failed the young in very significant ways. I realize that many of the choices made in those early months were driven by a lack of knowledge and a high degree of fear. I am not trying to point fingers or score partisan points. Hindsight is 20/20, as the saying goes.

Precisely that hindsight is what matters now. Children and young people have suffered the effects of isolation, and many missed critical moments of development and learning. They deserved better from us, and they deserve our honest accounting and efforts to improve now.

One lesson emerges from the experience of Catholic schools across the United States and here in Rhode Island. In many places, Catholic schools adapted to the lockdown more rapidly than other schools. They also reopened sooner than most, unless impeded by local strictures. The dedicated teachers and engaged parents helped to make the best of extremely difficult circumstances. As a result, Catholic schools across the U.S. maintained their learning and testing standards and even saw modest improvements even as the overall educational endeavor lost ground on an epic scale. As too many districts in Rhode Island suffer even now with high rates of chronic absenteeism, Catholic schools see daily attendance rates above 95%, a number that reflects ordinary absences for illness and family matters.

It is curious to me that this more successful navigating of the crisis occurred in schools that generally have much more limited resources than public schools, charter schools, and private schools. It tells me that money may not be the only or even most important factor in the mix. The federal government and many state and local governments set aside large resources to help schools during the pandemic. Early on in the emergency, they even shared some resources with Catholic schools. Over time the usual stance reasserted itself. Scandalously, some states later denied health and safety funds to children in Catholic schools.

I believe that Catholic schools achieved different results because of the culture of the schools. Catholic schools certainly strive for academic excellence, but there is something more to their

character that becomes apparent almost from the moment you enter one. Catholic schools have a sense of mission and a desire to educate and form the whole person. They teach integrity, faith and charity. They practice reverence for each and every human person. Parents are an integral and trusted part of the school family as they are the first and best formators of their children. Catholic schools forge a culture of love where children thrive as students and as persons.

I thank Governor McKee for his commitment to our young people and I encourage all to heed his call to take responsibility for forging a culture of education across this state and its many schools and religious and community organizations. I also express my gratitude to those who have devoted themselves to teaching and forming the young in every type of school.

After celebrating Catholic Schools Week, I would like to express my particular gratitude to the teachers and administrators in the Catholic schools of Rhode Island. I know that you make significant sacrifices to devote yourselves to this mission. The results you achieve speak for themselves.

I ask all of you who read this column to consider the choice for Catholic education in your family and to support this good work of forming a new generation in wisdom, integrity and faith.



MOST REVEREND RICHARD G. HENNING, S.T.D.
Bishop of Providence

Catholic Schools Week took place from January 28 to February 3. Please visit catholicschools.org for more information about open houses and other events.

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HOW TO LENT



FASTING

Catholics aged 18 through 59 are obligated to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Fasting means, at most, consuming one small meal and two smaller “collations” or snacks (which together wouldn’t equal one meal).



ABSTINENCE

Catholics 14 and older are obligated to abstain from consuming meat on Ash Wednesday, all Fridays of Lent, and Good Friday. On Fridays of the rest of the year, U.S. Catholics are permitted to substitute a different penance in lieu of abstinence from meat.



PRAYER

We are called to devote ourselves to more prayer during Lent. Consider attending Daily Mass or Adoration of Blessed Sacrament, adding a daily rosary, or praying the Liturgy of the Hours.



ALMSGIVING

Another important pillar of our Lenten practices, we are called to give more of our money and goods and perform other acts of charity during Lent.



PENANCE

Lent is an opportunity for us to prepare ourselves spiritually for the Great Solemnity of Easter. Examining one’s conscience and making a good sacramental confession are great ways to make this preparation. Check your local parish which may have expanded times for confession.

ON VALENTINE’S DAY AND ASH WEDNESDAY



FROM BISHOP RICHARD G. HENNING

This year, Ash Wednesday falls on February 14th. Most of us associate the date with Saint Valentine, and “Valentine’s Day” has become a major secular custom. I have no objections to the celebrations of the saint or even the celebration of romance in the secular observance. However, I must remind all that Ash Wednesday takes precedence over the custom. This solemn day of fasting and abstinence inaugurates the season of Lent. It recalls the faithful to a stance of humility towards God and openness to repentance. It reminds us of the Grace of the Lord Jesus and the saving power of Divine Love. For 2024, it is not a day for feasting.

Fortunately, the day before is Mardi Gras, “Fat Tuesday.” While it is not a feast of the Church, it is long standing custom to feast and celebrate on that day before the long season of Lenten preparation. I respectfully ask couples to consider celebrating Valentines on that day and leave Ash Wednesday to the eternal value of Christ’s love for us. May God’s love bless and keep you every day of the year!

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