

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, Year B

Dt 18:15-20; Ps 95:1-2,6-7,7-9; 1 Cor 7:32-35; Mk 1:21-28

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS WEEK 2012

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun

Sunday, January 29, 2012, 9:30 a.m.

Today is the beginning of **Catholic Schools Week**.

It is a week to celebrate the **crucial role** that Catholic schools play in the life of our **students**, their **families**, the **parish**, and the wider **Church**.

Catholic schools are all about **students** and **learning**, and of course, the **teachers** and the **curriculum**, the content that is taught.

Over the past two years the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has been paying a lot of attention to our Catholic schools.

There are **major problems** in many **Catholic schools** around the Twin Cities.

A few have **closed**.

Almost all have seen a **loss in enrollment**, some as bad as 20, 30, or 50 percent.

Others are **troubled financially**.

A few have problems with **low student achievement**.

And unfortunately, some **do not look very Catholic**;

but rather look more like a **private school** where the stress is on academics, but there is **little or no attention to spiritual matters**.

So the Archdiocese brought in an expert **consulting firm** from the University of Notre Dame to **analyze** the present situation

and then make **recommendations** on how to improve Catholic schools.

The consulting firm recommended a **stronger Catholic identity**, regular Masses, sacraments, prayer in the classroom every day, religion classes in the curriculum, the celebration of Christmas and Easter and the liturgical seasons, and crosses and statues and religious objects in the building.

St. Stephen's did not need to make one single improvement.

Every recommendation was already in place.

There were recommendations about the **quality of teachers**.

The teachers should all have **undergraduate college degrees**, bachelor's degrees, a BA, a bachelor of arts, or a BS, a bachelor of science.

As many as possible should have **graduate degrees**, a Master's degree.

And all should be **certified**,

licensed by the State of Minnesota for their academic field.

Again, St. Stephen's did not need to make any upgrades.

All of our teachers have degrees; all of our teachers are certified.

There were recommendations about **marketing**,
about **getting the message out** about Catholic schools,
to tell the wider parish, the tell the wider community,
about the value and importance of a Catholic-school education.
The consulting firm made recommendations about messaging, marketing:
announcements at Mass, material in the parish bulletin,
outdoor signs, indoor signs, mailings, post cards,
telemarketing, advertising in the newspaper.

Guess what?

St. Stephen's does all these things already!

There were recommendations about **good organizational structures**.

The consulting firm said for a parish school to flourish,
the parish should be well-organized.

There should be a **Pastoral Council** and a **Finance Council**.

There should be a **School Commission**.

The **school budget** should be part of the parish budget,
and the budget should be **balanced**,
and the budget should be **carefully administered**.

Again, you'll be glad to know that every one of these recommendations is already in place.

While other schools are scrambling to get these things in order,
at St. Stephen's every one of these items has been **in place for a long time**.

The Archdiocesan motto is: "Aim Higher!"

We've been aiming high for years.

"Aiming Higher" is not new for us; it is **standard procedure**.

It has always been my dream that our parish would be a **model parish**
and that our school would be a **model school**.

As the Archdiocesan Task Force did their comprehensive study,
and as they looked for schools that do it right,
and for schools that employ "**best practices**,"

St. Stephen's was mentioned over and over again.

We as a parish have every right to be very **proud** of our **school ministry**.

We are in a good place thanks a **broad base of support** from the **parish, parent** support,
and the **good work** of our **faculty and staff**, and our **principal, Mrs. Gustafson**.

I would like to ask that teachers and staff members and Mrs. Gustafson to please stand.

You have **performed your ministry well**.

You have put our **school** in a **great place**.

Thank you for **aiming so high** for so long.

We congratulate you!

Just because our faculty and staff has done so well does not mean that they have arrived.
We are not so good that we do not need to improve any more.
The Archdiocesan motto, Aim Higher, is on the money;
we are **high already**, and we need to **go yet higher**.
We are on the path of **continuous improvement**,
because “you are either getting better or getting worse;”
there is **no standing still** in life.

I learned **this lesson** very vividly in **my own education**.
I enjoyed a very **good Catholic school** education for **grade school**
at **Incarnation** Parish in south Minneapolis with the **Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters**.
I had a **fantastic education** in **high school** at **Crosier Seminary**.
My freshman and sophomore English teacher, **Fr. Bernard Mischke**,
was a **poet, lyricist, and author**.
He wrote the lyrics to many published hymns, and he wrote several books.
My junior and senior English teacher, **Fr. Bill McNiff**,
wrote our textbook, and he was very **demanding**,
and he **aimed high** when it came to **writing skills**.
When I was in **high school** I wrote for the **school newspaper, sports editor!**
After I completed my B.S. degree in biology,
I enrolled at the **University of Minnesota** to get a **M.A. in exercise physiology**.
I thought I was a pretty good writer.
I was aiming higher, so I asked the chairman of the department to be my advisor.
Then I wrote **my first paper** for him,
and I worked hard on it, and I thought I would get an A.
It came back to me with a **red mark** on **almost every line**:
bad construction, bad punctuation, bad topic sentence,
inadequate clarity, poor reasoning, weak conclusion.
There was red on the paper.
I was seeing red. I was mad.
A day later, after I cooled down,
I went back and reread Dr. Stull’s comments.
Every comment was correct.
I may have **thought** that I was a **good writer**,
but I had **tons of room for improvement**.
After years and years of quality education,
I ran into a **professor** who was **truly brilliant**.
Of all of my professors in every degree program,
he was the best writer by far.
He set the **bar exceedingly high**.
He **demanded** that his **students aim high**.
Later, I wrote **two major papers** for him before I finished my degree,
both research papers, both over fifty pages, and my **goal** was **no red marks**.
I never completely succeeded at this; there were **a few red marks**,
and my **writing skill greatly improved**.

Dr. G. Alan Stull was a **Master Teacher**, a “professor” in the truest sense of the word.
I didn’t realize how much I needed to improve.
I didn’t even know that I needed to go higher,
but he took me to a place where I had never been,
and I am eternally grateful to him.

Dr. Stull challenged me.

He wouldn’t let me get by with medium work.
It is the **duty of our teachers to challenge our students.**

A half-hearted effort is not acceptable.

Teachers, I challenge you to **rededicate yourselves to aim higher**,
to **serve more generously**, and to **call forth the best** from your students.

Students, I ask you to **aim higher**,
to **apply yourselves** to your schoolwork
and to **cooperate** with your teachers.

Parents, I ask you to **aim higher**,
to take an **active interest** in your **child’s education**.

Don’t let your get by with mediocre; don’t be satisfied with “OK.”

Insist that **your children aim higher**,
both in the schoolwork, and in **learning** and practicing their **faith**.

All of us have had many teachers.
You’ve had some good ones. I’ve had some good ones.

When I look back, I look back with amazement.
How is it that I could be so blessed to have
Fr. Mischke, Fr. McNiff, and Dr. Stull as my professors?
If a person ever wanted to aim high,
I couldn’t do much better than those three.

Except **none** of those three **ranks Number One!**

For you and me, there is one teacher, who ranks above every other,
and this applies on Catholic Schools Week, and every other week of the year.

The Teacher,

the one who is **spellbinding** by his **teaching** (Mk 1:22a);
the one who **teaches** with **authority** (Mk 1:22b,27);
the one whose **teaching** far **surpasses** the **scribes** (Mk 1:22b);
the one whose teaching is even **better than Fr. Mischke, Fr. McNiff, or Dr. Stull**;
the one whose teaching goes far **beyond** anyone on **our faculty or me**;
the Teacher above every other teacher is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the **truth**, and he **speaks** the **truth** (Jn 14:6a).

Jesus has the **words** of **everlasting life** (Jn 6:68b).

Moses may have been a **great teacher** (Dt 18:15-18);

Jesus is **the Teacher** (Mk 4:38; 5:35; 9:17,38; 10:17,20,35; 12:14,19,32; 13:1; 14:14).

Would you like to “Aim Higher”?

Would you like to go to a place where you never thought you could go?

Jesus, the Teacher, can and will take us higher!

If we **write up** our **life story** and **submit it to Jesus**,

I'd bet that all of us would have **a lot of red marks**.

When we get our paper back,

we probably would be **disappointed** by the number of **red marks**,

but if we are honest, we all have plenty of **room for improvement**.

Let's not get mad at *the* Teacher,

but pay attention to what *the* Teacher has to say.

Jesus is asking every one of **us** to **Aim Higher**.

If we **listen to Jesus**,

and **takes his words to heart**,

Jesus will take us higher than we ever thought we could go.

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Introduction

Liturgical Use. This passage is proclaimed on the Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B, but it is not proclaimed for a daily Mass, nor is it used for the feast day of any saint, or for any ritual, votive, or special Mass.

Messianic Prophecy. This is the first time in the Hebrew Scriptures that a Messiah is promised to the people. Centuries later another major prophecy was made to King David (2 Sam 7:12-14a). Additional prophecies are found in the Psalms (Ps 2:7; 72; 89, esp. vv. 20-38; and 132); and the Servant of the Lord Canticles of the prophet Isaiah (Is 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12).

The Occasion. Moses was at Mount Nebo. It is roughly 1240 BC. The forty year trek through the desert was over (1280-1240 BC). The people were about to enter the Promised Land, Israel. Moses was an old man, near death. Moses had led them for many, many years, both in Egypt and in the desert. Moses was the supreme teacher and law giver, the greatest figure of the Old Testament. He was near death, and the people were greatly troubled: How will we ever get along without Moses? Yes, Joshua will succeed him, but no one will ever fill Moses' shoes. "When you are dead and gone, will God abandon us?" "With you teaching us no longer, will there ever be another teacher?"

Commentary

Dt 18:15: [Moses spoke to the people saying,] "A prophet like me will the Lord, your God, raise up for you from among your own kinsmen; to him you shall listen.

A prophet. A prophet speaks on God's behalf. Prophets call the people to holiness and show them how to live according to God's ways. A prophet often appears during a time of laxity or corruption and challenges the people to reform, to see and admit their wrongdoing, turn away from their sin, and live a good and holy life. Because people are stubborn and cling to their evil ways, prophets usually experience tremendous resistance, persecution, and many times, if the opposition gains enough momentum, are put to death.

A prophet. This does not refer to just any prophet. Many prophets arose over the centuries to guide the people back to God. This refers to "*the* prophet," the greatest of all prophets, the definitive and final voice of divine teaching. When the John the Baptist began his prophetic ministry, Jews from Jerusalem asked him if he was "the Prophet" (Jn 1:21), referring to the long-anticipated Messiah.

A prophet like me. Moses considered himself a prophet which is not his normal classification. In the gospels there are many references to "the law and the prophets" (Mt 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Lk 16:16,29,31; 24:27:) in which Moses represents The Law while Elijah represents prophecy. The former prophets included Elijah and Elisha, while the Latter Prophets included

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets. Nevertheless, God called Moses directly from the burning bush to be a spokesman for the Lord (see Ex 3:4-4:17), saying, “Go then! It is I who will assist you in speaking and will teach you what you are to say” (Ex 4:12). Moses spoke on God’s behalf in Egypt and throughout the forty year desert trek, he faithfully conveyed God’s messages to the people, and in this sense Moses is the greatest prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Like me. The New Moses will resemble and exceed the first Moses. Moses spoke on behalf of God, the Messiah will be the Son of God; Moses was the law-giver, the Messiah will be the Supreme and final voice of God’s law; Moses was their teacher, the Messiah will be *the* greatest Teacher ever; Moses led the people through the desert to the Promised Land, the Messiah will lead all people through the course of life to the eternal promised land, heaven.

A prophecy fulfilled. In Peter’s second major speech after Pentecost (Acts 3:11-26), Peter quoted this verse (Acts 3:22) as part of his argument that Jesus is this prophet. Stephen did the same when he testified before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:37).

The Lord, your God, will raise up. *The prophet will be a great gift from God, and it will be God, and God alone, who will do this.*

For you. The Messiah-to-come will be for the benefit of everyone.

The Lord’s Beneficence. *The prophet will be an awesome gift from God. It will be from the kindness of God’s heart for the people that God loves so much.*

From among your own kinsmen. The promised Messiah would come from the Chosen People Israel. The Messiah would have a royal spiritual heritage and be the New Israel.

To him you shall listen. “If today you hear his voice, harden not your heart” (Ps 95:7b,8a; see the Responsorial Psalm). God will make a similar statement at the Transfiguration: “This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him” (Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:35).

Listen to him, A Reflection. “Him” is Jesus. God was speaking through Moses: “When I send *the* Prophet Jesus to you, please pay the utmost of attention to him. He is my voice. His words are my words. What he teaches is true. Listen first. Do not have a hard heart. If you have a stony heart, switch to a natural heart. Take his words to heart. Allow him to touch your heart. Be moved. Be changed. Love me with your whole heart. Devour the Word, make it part of yourself, put it into practice, and announce it to others.”

Dt 18:16: This is exactly what you requested of the Lord, your God, at Horeb on the day of assembly, when you said, ‘Let us not again hear the voice of the Lord, our God, nor see this great fire any more lest we die.’

This is what you requested. Moses was saying, “God was listening to you.” “God cares about you.” “God will answer your prayers.”

The down side. The people had to wait 1240+ years, a very long time. God does not answer immediately. Yet, Jesus came at the time in human history deemed best by God.