

Homily for St. Joseph Academy / Sisters of St. Joseph
150th Anniversary Mass
November 10, 2016

Celebration: Votive Mass of St. Joseph

Readings: From the Lectionary of March 19th

2 Sam 7 – “Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever”

Romans 4 – “I have made you the father of many nations”

Luke 2:41-51a – The Finding in the Temple

Dearest Students, Teachers, Families and members of the School Council: In the Name of the Lord Jesus, I greet you on this marvelous occasion of the celebration of the 150th anniversary of St. Joseph’s Academy.

Do you have any idea how privileged we are to be a part of this celebration? We are the beneficiaries of a most remarkable achievement: This Academy – founded just one year after the Civil War – is the oldest continuous Catholic High School in the State of Florida. It also has an unparalleled tradition of excellence in educating young people to be both responsible citizens and active members of the Kingdom of God. This anniversary is a milestone that we celebrate in the most fitting way in the most Holy Eucharist. As we gather around the Lord’s altar today we – clergy, religious, teachers, parents and students – represent the entire diocese in prayer. This is a celebration for the whole local church.

Allow me, first of all, to thank our Principal, Mr. DeClemente, and all of our generous teachers for your wonderful ministry of teaching our youth and handing on to them the Catholic Faith in all its integrity. May God reward you for the good that you do in the formation of our students.

I must also thank the dear Sisters of St. Joseph for their constant gift of themselves and their talents to the education of our youth. It is hard to imagine that a single community of sisters has spent *a full century and a half* humbly serving tens of thousands of young people in our area of Florida. This is truly a formidable accomplishment! To Sister Suzan Foster, our Vice Principal, and to all the sisters present and past who have taught at St. Joseph Academy, I offer my heartfelt

expression of gratitude and my deep esteem for a mission well-accomplished and sustained these many decades.

The impact of the Catholic education imparted by this school over the last 150 years has been enormous. Let us go back to the beginning of the school to see why. I am privileged to be the successor of the venerable Bishop Augustin Verot, whose concern for the African slaves after the Emancipation Proclamation led him to offer them the best gift he could give them – namely, a faith-based education. He invited eight Sisters of St. Joseph to come all the way from France to begin this mission. It was a true work of charity and a strong indication of the Church's love for the poor.

Like the familiar parable in the Gospel, the smallest mustard seed of a 19th century school grew into the strong and vibrant educational tree that it is today, bearing much fruit. The first graduating class of St. Joseph's Academy in 1874 had only two students! The graduating class of 2016 with a current student body of over 400 students is projected to expand to about 600 students in the next few years. St. Joseph's has grown from a one-room schoolhouse to a comprehensive educational mission that includes at least forty-eight international students from eight different countries. A truly Catholic education from St. Joseph Academy has allowed thousands of students – and families – to encounter Jesus Christ and to be transformed in mind, body and soul.

But that is not the whole of it. The faculty and students have clearly adopted the spirit of the dear Sisters of St. Joseph in service to their fellow human beings. Students at St. Joseph Academy conduct a wide range of services to the poor and needy of our surrounding area not only as a school requirement but as a mandate of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At St. Joseph Academy the love of God and love of neighbor go hand in hand.

I believe that our patron, St. Joseph, is very pleased to see the immense fruits of the Catholic faith and education that are manifested in the school that bears his name. Even though St. Joseph does not speak even one word in Scripture, he nonetheless gives us an eloquent witness of what it means to let your life be transformed by an encounter with Christ. Except for the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph was the person who was the closest to Jesus in the most formative years of His life. Joseph therefore has a lot to say to us about Christ.

In today's Gospel, we see that Joseph and Mary *had actually lost the Christ Child* for a period of three days. We may pass over this story as a pious fable, but it is a true story with a profound meaning. Every parent can certainly understand the agony that they would feel if one of their children should be lost for three whole days. They would be absolutely *desperate* until they could find the child again. The lesson is very real for us. Joseph and Mary, even though they were saints, were allowed by God to feel all the agony of sinners who lose track of God or are alienated from Him in their lives. The response of Joseph and Mary was not to sit still and cry about the loss, but rather, to search diligently for God again. They did not give up their search after one day or two. They kept searching and eventually found Him in the most logical place He could be: in His Father's House.

Dear students, all of us lose track of God in some form or another at different times in our lives. You will probably have that same experience as you grow older and enter the very complex world that we live in. But when you are faced with the sense of God's absence, the loneliness of the world or the many disappointments that naturally occur in life, don't give up your search for God. Sometimes God allows this sense of loss for a reason which is not always immediately clear to us. It is said that Mary "reflected on these things in her heart" for a long time after the events in order to understand their full significance. Hopefully, your Catholic education will help you to be like Joseph and Mary and in your times of crisis to look for Him where He is most likely to be found, in His Father's House, which is *the Church*. God will always be found by those who search for Him, and He is certain to be found in His own House.

The Gospel story likewise shows that, while Joseph and Mary were the first teachers of the Christ Child, they were also open to *being taught* by Him. When Jesus told His parents that He had to be in His Father's House, it was a profound revelation for them. I'm sure that they pondered that truth for a long time and came to the same conclusion that all parents must eventually come to regarding their children: namely, that their children belonged *primarily* to God and that, as parents, they are chosen stewards of the gift of life that God entrusts to them. Having known many parents and families over the course of my priestly life, I can tell you: *being a parent is not an easy job*.

My dear students, it may not be evident to you at this time in your life, but the primary work of your parents is to help you attain salvation. The fact that they have made the sacrifice to send

you to this school, which offers you the best human and faith education possible, is a testimony to their extremely important role in your spiritual journey. At the same time, they learn about the faith and the Will of God as they educate you and raise their families. You are also very much a part of *their* faith journey. God has designed families in this way to help us all achieve the most important thing of all: the salvation of our souls. At some point during your time at St. Joseph Academy, please make sure you show your parents (and your teachers) how much you appreciate their sacrifice and their care for you as a child of God. They are acting in the role of Mary and Joseph on your behalf.

A final word for all of us as we cross this threshold of 150 years of faith at St. Joseph Academy. We are here *for Christ* and *because of Christ*. Like Mary and Joseph, our faith in Him motivates us to learn about Jesus and to encounter Him in the Church and in doing so we come to love Him more each day. If a student should learn all the human knowledge available to the world but fail to have a very personal encounter with Christ here at St. Joseph Academy, such an education would be quite incomplete. Christ is the power and the wisdom of God, as St. Paul says (1 Cor 1:24), and in Him we have everything we need to live a full life in this world and to experience happiness in the world to come. St. Joseph himself *wants us* to know Christ and to love Him deeply.

My prayer for all of you during this remarkable anniversary is one that St. Paul offered for his communities so long ago: “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” and that you may come “to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:17.19). Each time you come to the Eucharist you receive the bread of life which is transformative in your quest for the truth and your thirst for true love. Come often willing...in personal freedom to this banquet of life, life eternal.