

A teacher's spirit

Believe it or not, there are a good number of teachers who cringe at the words “back to school.” I know they exist because I used to be one of them. I’d hide under my blanket (wait ... it’s summer ... how about beach towel?) when the first commercials for backpacks and notebooks aired. When that dreaded week of teacher return arrived, I’d suffer through one professional development and the next, longing for peaceful days uninhibited by rigid schedules forcefully punctuated by the garish sound of an electronic bell (if you can call it that).

Meetings about the educational theory du jour (insert acronym here) dragged on for hours and seldom themselves embraced the strategies they aimed to promote . The weight of 180 days’ worth of squabbles, stand-offs, and the doldrums caused me to sink in my chair, as I doodled my way through a drab lecture on discipline.

Once the kids arrived, I remembered why I was there. From the first handshake and smile I exchanged with the young people entrusted to my care, I felt that fire reignite.

Fortunately, most teachers who dread going back to school are, like me, soon reminded of how and why we got there in the first place. But, the meetings which precede the start of the school year needn’t be pointless and lackluster. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that to be the case over the past two weeks as a new teacher in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

The biggest difference between public schools and here, is that great care is taken to nourish a teacher’s spirit before the school year begins. I will admit, I had a stormy grey cloud over my head (figuratively and literally) when I drove to a new teacher retreat at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Ellicott City. It was a long ride from my Aberdeen home, and I spent most of the time thinking about how much I wanted to be with my boys. But when I left that afternoon, I was changed. Here’s what happened:

· I joined a group of about 50 Catholics in the lovely and spacious Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church for prayerful reflection. I felt so encouraged in finding myself surrounded by teachers who were not only new to the system, as I was, but who also share my faith. In our small group discussions, we found we shared the same apprehensions and directed each other back to God in looking for solutions for our problems.

· We were led through various spiritual exercises by the gracious and able hands of Sister Sally Russell and Mrs. Julie St. Croix. Sister Sally is witty and stimulating, while Mrs. St. Croix is thought-provoking and soothing. They’re perfect complements for each other, and excellent teachers, who always kept our minds and

spirits moving as we pondered things like identity, relationships, creation, Psalms, the trinity, and how we can improve our own faith communities.

I left invigorated at the end of the second day, ready to embrace the Holy Spirit and to allow the Holy Spirit to embrace me. I smiled every time I thought about the presence of the Lord in my classroom being welcomed, rather than being told to leave my God at home. He's always been with me. Now I can share Him with my colleagues and students.

Newly energized, I arrived to the St. Joan of Arc back-to-school meeting to find myself amongst kindred spirits. It's a very small school, with less than 20 teachers, all of whom exude love for what they do. We met in a social studies and language arts teacher's classroom which was so embellished with posters, maps and artifacts, I could barely tell what colors the walls were.



Everything in the room was beautiful, educational and inspiring. As I took in the replica ships and pirate statues (to connect to an upcoming novel) and an astonishing array of graphic organizers, I wanted to be one of that teacher's students, and hope that my boys will be in a few years.

As we were waiting for the meeting to begin, our principal was passing out St. Francis prayer cards. "I had these blessed in Assisi," she told us. She enthusiastically shared her vision for the year, touched on a few housekeeping matters, and sent us on our way to prepare for the students.

The next day, there was a brief technology meeting, followed by much more time to organize, plan, and decorate. I have never been blessed with so much time to get ready for my students, and for that I am tremendously grateful.

Friday was, for me, the highlight of the week. We celebrated Mass at the Cathedral of Mary our Queen with Archbishop Lori. I was greeted at the door by Elizabeth Ann Seton (okay, maybe it was an impersonator), and opened the door to find the entire edifice packed with people, teachers, who believe in God's word and wish to pass it along (with some other material, too).

There were screens on either side of the church displaying photographs of teachers from the archdiocese who had met milestones in their careers. I was delighted to see the face of Mr. Craig White, my middle school social studies teacher and the world's biggest fan of Hollywood's golden age. He's been teaching at St. Margaret's for 40 years. I was equally excited to run into Mrs. Kathy Petrone, my second-grade teacher, who hasn't changed a bit. (Maybe teaching is the secret to the fountain of youth.)

The Mass was beautiful with traditional hymns, such as "Hail Holy Queen," "Ye

Watchers and Ye Holy Ones,” and, of course, “Ave Maria.” The performers were excellent, with operatic vocals enveloping the space along with warm brass notes and the triumph of the organ. The Gospel, Luke 1:26-38 told the tale of the Annunciation. I reflected on how just as God called Mary to be the Mother of God’s Son Jesus, I feel that God planted the seed in me to be a teacher. I tried to stifle that light, but He reminded me of who I am meant to be by leading me to St. Joan of Arc. In his homily, the Archbishop urged us to call on Mary in times of distress and to live according to the beatitudes. All excellent advice for teachers embarking on a great new year.

Finally, the most special moment of the week occurred when my two cousins and I met outside of the church after Mass. By the grace of God, we have all found ourselves privileged enough to serve as teachers for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. My grandfather (their great-grandfather) set out to be a teacher during the Great Depression to follow in his sister’s footsteps. How wonderful it is that we’ve chosen to follow in his?

Having completed my first week, I am calmer, happier, and more motivated than I have ever been at the beginning of a school year. I attribute it to the meditation I was guided through at the retreat, to the warm welcome and generous gift of time I’ve received at my new school, and to the blessings I received during one of the most beautiful Masses I’ve ever attended. This year, it’s not going to be about survival, but spiritual growth.