

Catholic Review Column: Back to School 2013

I went back to school this past Monday.

Well, sort of. I visited three of our Catholic schools on Opening Day to greet students and their parents, to visit classrooms, to meet and greet teachers, principals, and parents (especially those new to our school system) and to experience all over again the thrill and energy of that first day of a new school year.

I began the day at Our Lady of Grace School in Parkton in northern Baltimore County. Driving along Middletown Road on a beautiful sunny morning, the campus (25 acres of rolling countryside) sat upon the hills in the distance. As I approached, I was most impressed by the attractive buildings and the handsome layout of the campus.

Once at the school, the excitement and hopefulness of those present was palpable. Students emerged from their cars—some more apprehensively than others—and were quickly reacquainted with classmates and teachers. The students all seemed to know one another and the happiness of being reunited with their school friends was most evident. Moms and dads also seemed happy (possibly for different reasons!) as they parked their cars after proceeding through a very orderly and efficient drop-off process. An impressive number stuck around for the opening year Mass that was to take place, and many I spoke with had wonderful things to say about Our Lady of Grace.

I was fortunate to get a quick tour of the school from Father Sam Young. The facility looks as new as it likely did when it opened its doors in 2000. Science labs (OLGS is a STEM school), SmartBoards, and a lovely courtyard were among the many pristine and attractive features that stood out during my visit. New principal, Jeffrey Dudley, and his wonderful staff are poised to have a great school year as they lead Our Lady of Grace School and its entire student body into its next period of growth and excellence!

My next stop was St. Joseph School in Cockeysville. Longtime pastor Monsignor Paul Cook and Mr. Terrence Golden greeted me upon my arrival and I was pleased to offer a blessing to the entire school at an opening day assembly in the school's spacious multi-purpose room. The students were abuzz that first day and all were very gracious in greeting me and Dr. Barbara Edmondson, Superintendent of Schools, who accompanied me on my tour.

I visited several classrooms and could easily see why St. Joseph students annually perform at such a high level. St. Joseph provides the facilities and enthusiastic teachers that give SJS students every tool and motivation to succeed in the classroom, as well as and in the many athletic and extra-curricular activities available at the Cockeysville school. I was especially happy to meet the kindergarten classes. The children were delightful in their responses to my questions and full of hope and excitement at beginning a new school year.

The same can be said for Immaculate Conception School in Towson, just down York Road from St. Joseph's. The campus, which can be seen from a great distance atop the hill overlooking much of Towson, has undergone tremendous growth under Father Joe Barr, Pastor, and Principal Madeline Meaney.

Everyone I met during my visit to ICS was rightly proud of the tremendous progress taking place at the school, including the new Immaculate Conception Middle School, which is located in the former high school. Over the past two years, the facility has been transformed and is once again bustling with students. And with three sixth grade classes, the expansion is coming just in time. In addition to the middle school, other enhancements to ICS include a TV studio, three science labs and new robotics lab (ICS is a STEM school), a new and improved computer lab, art studio and a refurbished chapel in the middle school. With technology and talent evident in every corner of the school, it is easy to see why ICS increased its enrollment from last year by some 30+ students.

At each school I spoke about how proud and happy I am that Catholic school students grown in their knowledge and love of their faith and that our schools help them to grow physically, intellectually, and socially.

Bishop Madden, who visited St. Francis of Assisi and Ss. James & John Schools,

reported similar first day impressions.

I am most grateful to all who made my trip “back to school” such an enjoyable and encouraging one. A staunch supporter and believer in Catholic schools, I left Monday feeling even more encouraged and energized about them and am grateful to the students, parents, teachers, principals, dedicated priests, and all who contribute to their continued growth and success.