

Presence: Pastors embrace active role at K-8 schools

The Archdiocese of Baltimore counts 32 K-8 schools on parish grounds. While the role of a pastor can include being a canonical representative, their presence extends well beyond a board room. The Catholic Review visited with three priests who consider it a privilege to minister to a parish school.

Father Ernest Cibelli

St. Mary Catholic School, Hagerstown

On the website of the only Catholic elementary school in Washington County, under the “Catholic Identity” page, mention is made of a daily prayer offering.

“At least once a week, I like to do morning announcements and the offerings on the P.A.,” said Father Cibelli, who finds “different ways of showing up.”

“Sometimes, I’ll go through the cafeteria during lunch, but the biggest, most personal contact I have is walking across the playground. I deliberately do that, whenever I can, to have a presence among the kids.”

Whether it’s First Friday Mass for the entire student body, or the weekly Mass he offers for each grade, Father Cibelli lingers afterward to “say hi, just like you would at Sunday Mass.”

A product of St. Louis School in Clarksville, Mount St. Joseph High School in Irvington and Mount St. Mary’s University in Emmitsburg, he takes seriously his role as “spiritual head” of both his parish and school families, of which he does not distinguish.

“Our faculty does a great job of instituting the faith in our kids, and that makes it easy,” Father Cibelli said. “We’re complementary, in helping our kids appreciate their faith. Faith is not something you hang up when you go home, or put away when

you finish your homework.”

Like his predecessors, he'll pop into classrooms to take ponderous questions about theology, call bingo and flip pancakes during a Catholic Schools Week fundraiser.

“I truly have been blessed with the pastors I've had,” said Tricia McDermott, in her 16th year on the staff of a school she first encountered as a parent. “Their presence, you can feel it.”

Father T. Austin Murphy Jr.

Our Lady of Hope-St. Luke School, Dundalk

Walking across the playground is also a custom of Father Murphy, who acknowledges an ulterior motive.

“Walking across the playground, I feel welcome and wanted,” he said. “I love hearing ‘Good morning, Father Austin,’ when I enter a classroom, and hearing kids learn to read for the first time.

“I'm just a big kid, myself.”

Ordained in 2003, he can remember being quizzed by the office of clergy personnel about possible assignments, and hoping that one day he would be assigned to a parish with a school.

“A parish school was huge in my own formation and identity,” said Father Murphy, who attended St. Agnes School in Catonsville, and then Mount St. Joseph High School in Irvington. “The priests were very active, came and talked to classes. I want our kids to be comfortable with priests.

“They're excited to say, ‘You're at my school.’ I like that.”

In addition to offering Mass and blessing throats near Feb. 3, the feast of St. Blaise, Father Murphy writes an Epiphany blessing in chalk over classroom doors.

“Those little things tell you that Catholics and Catholicism are important, whether

you're Catholic or not," he said. "So much of our identity is tied up in those rituals. They're not in the Bible, but they're part of our fabric, part of our liturgy."

Father Murphy is not taken for granted by the school's principal.

"He actively promotes our mission in his homilies and church bulletins, and members of the school family recognize a genuine care for us," School Sister of Notre Dame Irene Pryle said. "He's an active member of the board, challenges the status quo and adds humor when needed."

That includes posing for photos with one of the Ravens' mascots.

"I'll come in like the big uncle, throw everything into disarray, and leave it to the teacher to calm them down," Father Murphy said of his classroom visits. "The teachers like that I am intentionally present to all the kids."

Father John Williamson

St. Augustine School, Elkridge

Father Williamson's grasp of the commitment families make to Catholic education came early.

"I saw my mom get a job when my sister, Christina, began school," said Father Williamson, who attended St. Joseph School in Fullerton. "I was in the fourth grade. I appreciate the sacrifice our families make; the tuition then was nothing compared to what our parents pay now."

He is pastor of the Catholic Community of Ascension and St. Augustine. The former's school, in Hale-thorpe, closed in 2010; the next year, St. Augustine was added to his duties.

"When I was assigned here (by then-Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien), he really wanted an increased involvement with students and the school. It's something after my own heart. The kids know who I am. With 260 students, it's hard to know everyone's name, but I'm getting there."

Father Williamson is a graduate of Loyola Blakefield and Mount St. Mary's, where he majored in history and English. While teaching religion to the sixth, seventh and eighth grades once a month, he references his travels to Assisi, Lourdes and Rome.

"The eighth grade does church history," he said. "We were founded in 1844, St. John Neumann was an early pastor, and the art in our church ... it's something closer to home than (the cathedral at) Chartres."

How does he promote vocations?

"By example," Father Williamson said. "When I was an altar boy, the priests were always happy. I want the kids to remember that about me. Sometimes, I'll talk more directly to certain young men. If I'm filled with joy, hopefully it's something they'll be curious about."

Denise Ball, the principal, said Father Williamson possesses "the positive energy that is essential to model our Catholic faith in word and action," and that his witness contributed to a middle-schooler asking how she could become Catholic last year.

"Catholic identity is what it's all about," he said. "It's what parents want. A lot of the culture runs against that. Give them a firm foundation, so they can continue to contribute to the church, 30, 40 years down the road."