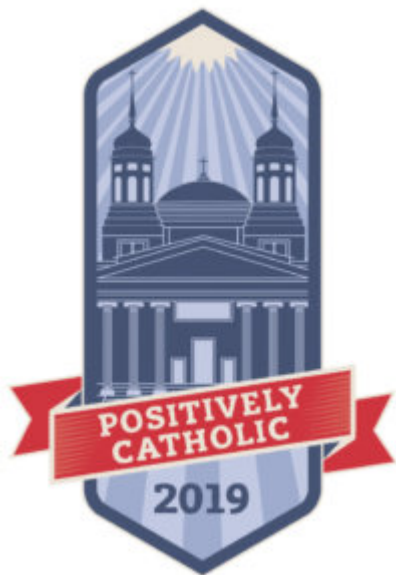


Sharing God's gifts: Serving others a part of schools' 'Catholic identity'

Second in a Series



The October 2017 print issue of the Catholic Review explored the theme of "Positively Catholic" through education, health care, parish life and service. Each Review print issue in 2019 will explore one of those aspects of being "Positively Catholic."

Schools across the Archdiocese of Baltimore took to heart its theme for the 2018-19 school year, "Created for Good Works."

Based on Ephesians 2:10, "For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them," it highlights the spirit of service many schools have ingrained in their communities.

Nowhere is that better exemplified than at Resurrection-St. Paul School in Ellicott City.

"(Service is) part of our Catholic identity," said Karen Murphy, principal of the pre-K-8 school. "We can always find something to give to another."

Using God-given gifts is a point the school instills in its students. When 38 fifth-graders set out to fill the same number of purses with items for women in need, Kristin Urbanski, one of their teachers, talked about connecting the concept to “real-life experiences.”

Before their monthly service project of packing lunches for those in need, Urbanski stops children prior to their own lunch to ask how they feel. She reminds them that they know, even though they are hungry, there is a meal waiting for them; she hopes that they begin to understand why their contribution is needed.

“God created you to do this good stuff,” Murphy said, citing a recent trip to First Fruits Farm in Freeland in northern Baltimore County, where students picked potatoes. “It’s not just giving (money) to the poor.”

Service is not just giving of alms, but of one’s authentic self, Murphy said.

Patsy Grue and Dawn Keys, middle-school religion teachers at Resurrection-St. Paul, use social media for students to share their service projects. Keys said she often hears from successful graduates, such as Abby Komiske, now a sophomore at Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville.

Keys inspired Komiske to help start the “Breakfast Bunch” at Resurrection-St. Paul, a club where friends connect and share a meal while completing service projects.

“Not only were we helping, we were feeling good about it,” Komiske said. “In small ways, you can impact people.”

Komiske said the lesson that every person has gifts that can help others stayed with her. With two other students, she will launch a club similar to the “Breakfast Bunch” at Mount de Sales in the 2019-20 school year.

Students will have leadership of the new club and an opportunity to grow through planning, generating ideas and collaborating with existing groups.

Becoming leaders

The students of Sisters Academy of Baltimore are no strangers to assisting others.

The tuition-free grades 5-8 school for girls from southwest Baltimore incorporates service into its 9½-hour school day.

“It’s part of our philosophy,” said School Sister of Notre Dame Delia Dowling, president. “By calling forth service, the girls realize how gifted they are. ... It affirms their goodness, their giftedness.”

Fifth-graders begin by participating in various projects for outside organizations. In sixth grade they volunteer at Coursey Station, a Catholic Charities senior community across the street; in seventh they volunteer at Paul’s Place, which provides programs, services and support to individuals and families in southwest Baltimore.

Eighth-graders serve their school community, a favorite project for eighth-graders Kiyah Elliott and Mo’Riyah Johnson.

“I’ve seen the outcome, but now I get to be a part of it,” Elliott said. “It’s important to make a difference in others’ lives and not make everything about yourself.”

Johnson noted that many Sisters Academy students come from communities plagued by violence.

“Doing service distracts us from that and pulls us away from the negativity,” she said.

Eighth-grader Destiny Shepard said some came from schools where they were not exposed to service opportunities, experiences, she said, that have helped her and her classmates mature.

Little things can make a big difference, said Shepard, of the gratitude she witnessed while volunteering at Paul’s Place, where students serve meals and help clients shop for clothes.

“It touched your heart,” she said.

Reaching out

For more than a decade, Calvert Hall College High School in Towson has joined with fellow Lasallian institution De La Salle Blackfeet School in Browning, Mont., to

create a lasting experience for both student bodies.

Ten Calvert Hall juniors and seniors will spend Catholic Schools Week in Browning, headquarters of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, in the school's classrooms, assisting teachers and sharing their talents with the students.

Edwin Ortiz, campus minister at Calvert Hall, said the trip provides formation for students. Participating juniors, he said, tend to become school leaders as seniors; keeping values and service at the center of their lives as they go on to college is reinforced for current seniors.

"As they serve, they're also figuring out where they can make the most impact," Ortiz said. "Our boys are so passionate about serving others."

John Mirarchi, a senior who served on the 2018 trip, said it was beneficial to learn from community members about life on a reservation and to witness the effects of poverty in a mountainous landscape unlike Baltimore.

"It was maybe one of the most impactful experiences I've had in high school," Mirarchi said, adding that it was rewarding to get to know the children. "Montana has kind of instilled this passion in me that I can't quell."

"It's sort of invigorated me with this new fervor for service ... (and) inspired me to go out and be a better person."

As Mirarchi searches for a college, finding one with a commitment to service is a priority.

"(Service is) something that God calls you to do," said Mirarchi, a parishioner of St. John the Evangelist in Long Green Valley. "He gave us the tools and now we have to go and build his kingdom."