

Our Lady of the Assumption School Open House shows how Catholic education elevates students and country

Rarely have I been more encouraged about the power of our Catholic faith to bring truth and beauty to our community and country than during the Open House at Our Lady of the Assumption School on Jan. 26 during National Catholic Schools Week.

Walking into the classrooms is entering a world of beauty, color, and spirit. The rooms pulse with promise, purpose and encouragement. Along the walls, biblical messages and images call students to a life beyond themselves.

The classrooms are impeccably neat and clean. Students' letters and messages are all precisely arranged with no smudges or disorder.

Posted on the wall in the sixth grade classroom are photographs of each student with his or her "buddy," a younger pupil the student helps take through the school experience. On the desks are "We are Family" messages from each pupil. One begins, "We are family means everyone is somehow linked."

A large poster in the corner of the room shows Jesus with several small children gathered around him. He is looking upward toward the birds flying above the trees. "The birds of the air neither sow nor reap.... and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." Titles on other nearby pictures include, "Trust in God," "Be kind to others," and "God will never leave you."

Between classroom visits, parents, students and visitors gather on the grass around pots of hot coffee, scones and cookies. The sound of kids laughing and chatting with their friends fills the air. In the classrooms, students point out a poem or a paper they wrote to their parents and grandparents.

The children are also taught to engage in the life of the country. On a wall in the seventh grade classroom are displayed letters students have written to public figures, including to U.S. Supreme Court Justices John Roberts, Samuel Alito and Antonin Scalia. The tone in these letters has none of the sense of victimization and demands that so often permeate today's public discourse. These kids seem to have been taught esteem for the country and its institutions, and a respectful way of communicating. Instead of looking for what they can get, they seem to be focusing on what they can give.

The pupils are also taught about the moral code that drove our greatest leaders – giving them inspiring role models to emulate. Outside the computer room, a poster displays quotations from George Washington, including "To err is nature, to rectify error is glory."

A poster of Abraham Lincoln includes his words at the end of the Civil War, "With malice toward none, with charity for all...." From another speech: "Let us have faith that right makes might; and in that faith let us dare to do our duty as we understand it."

When the students reach 8th grade, they spend a week in Washington D.C., and nearby historic areas. Photos show last year's trip, with pupils in front of White House, the Iwo Jima Memorial, the Arlington National

Cemetery, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, and locations in Williamsburg and Jamestown.

The science room, for grades 5-8, features extensive displays of the cell cycle, hydroponics, and genetics with illustrations of splitting chromosomes composed of pipe cleaner strips in various colors. On one table, kids used clay to make a model of a cell and its parts.

And always, there is inspiration to offer encouragement for life's challenges. In the corner is a small photo of a smiling Natalie Giorgi, the student who tragically died last summer from an allergic reaction to a peanut snack. She is holding a cactus in a pot that she had grown in the class. Under the photo is the "Guardian Angel Prayer."

These children learn that life will not be a bed of roses, and that sorrows will happen. But they are also given strong internal sustenance from the message that no matter what happens in life, God will be there for us – and that a great purpose for our lives is to be there for others during their time of trial.

One student in a "My image of God" collection, drew a figure representing the Holy Spirit hovering above two people walking the earth. "He watches over me to help me out along my way through life," the pupil wrote. "God gives me strength.... I trust God will always love me and be with me throughout my life."

I could not help but think that if more children today could be exposed to this elevating world view, so much of the world's strife and problems could be solved.

As I am thinking this, a man carrying a baby walks by. A teacher says "hello." He smiles and points to a classroom across the way and says: "Memory Lane. I went to first grade there – in 1963."

This Open House was also a trip down Memory Lane for me. I was taught by Franciscan nuns at a spare grammar school in Arizona, with not much more than chalkboards, desks, books, and a slab of cement for recess. Yet in that simple setting I was taught what was most important in life.

The chord that ties my experience to what I saw at the Open House of Our Lady of the Assumption School confirms that the light of truth from a Catholic education still shines brightly and brings hope to a troubled world. We are, indeed, fortunate to have teachers, parents and a church community so dedicated to passing on the treasures of our heritage to future generations. Peggy Bengs, Our Lady of the Assumption Parishioner