

Pastors take seriously their role in schools

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

When I heard the news that Msgr. Francis Malone was chosen to be the next bishop of Shreveport, I was so excited. What a historical moment, a priest from our diocese, the Diocese of Little Rock, selected as a bishop.

I thought how well merited this is for him. But then I got a little selfish and started thinking about our Catholic schools. Who would be the next pastor at Christ the King Parish and would take on the role for the largest Catholic school in our diocese? It made me discern on what is the role the pastor serves in a parish school.

Most importantly, the pastor is the spiritual leader of the school. With this comes celebrating the liturgy throughout the school year for the school staff and students as well as scheduling reconciliation for the school. Quite often it might be that the pastor has to lead the staff or students with a retreat or reflections.

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A pastor has final approval over policies of the school. He fulfills this function, guided by diocesan policies and in close collaboration with the principal, the school board, the finance and pastoral councils of the parish, and the Office of Catholic Schools.

As a mission of the parish, the pastor makes the decision of the resources in which the parish can assist with for the operating needs of the school including facilities, tuition assistance and subsidy.

But the pastors' role is more than that. As our office visits the schools throughout the year, principals share with us the many activities and events that take place within their school community. We have priests who teach classes whether it is religion, foreign language or even a history class. So often the priests will visit a classroom or attend a school assembly.

He might be outside greeting parents in the car line as the children are being dropped off or being picked up. Many priests enjoy the school lunches with the students and listen to whatever stories the children happen to share that day. Some have even been sighted playing soccer or chase at recess with the students.

One can often see the priest in the bleachers of an athletic event cheering on the students or even being the bus driver to one of these events.

The priest partakes in the fundraising activities whether it be a dinner, a golf tournament or a carnival.

Two pastors serve on the diocesan board of education, Father Tony Robbins of Conway and Father Jack Sidler of Russellville. When asked about his role Father Robbins stated, "St. Joseph Parish is involved with many wonderful ministries, the greatest of which is our pre-K to 12th grade school. What I love about my role as pastor of St. Joseph School is the life that it brings to the broader parish community. Everyone involved — from administration, faculty, volunteers, students and families — brings a great blessing. I get to experience that every time

that we come together for adoration and celebration of the Eucharist at our Wednesday school Mass. It's here that we continue to thank God for his continued blessings and ask his help for our growth to become the saints he calls us to be."

Father Sidler, pastor of St. John in Russellville, responded, "I get to see daily, several generations of future Catholic school leaders growing up; second, each day I see bilingual children English and Spanish being integrated into society, again seeing future leaders developing. And, I truly love to hear the 'Our Father' said with such gusto and pray that they will always say that prayer with such excitement and exuberance."

The role of the pastor is more than just being present; it is their presence that makes the difference in our schools. It is a blessing to have the priests' presence in our schools being a role model for our students to follow.