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Heading back to school means preparing for young minds and spirits

by Mary Clifford Morrell

When I think about going back to Catholic school this year, I think about Noah's Ark. And when I think of Catholic school teachers, I think of Noah and his wife—bold in their faith and determined to take care of those put in their charge.

I think about what it takes to head out on uncharted waters, to build and nurture a community of unique individuals, to trust that everything will work out as planned and come up with creative solutions when it doesn't.

It takes courage, it takes planning, it takes paying attention to the needs of your ark family, and it takes faith in God.

That, for me, describes Catholic school educators.

Certainly, the 2021-22 school year is destined to be different than most other school years. For many children, it may be the first time they have been back in the school building, back in regular contact with peers and teachers, in almost two years.

Even for those young people who attended in-person learning last year, either full or part-time, the experience of the past two years has been one filled with many stressful challenges. Their lives have been disrupted. They have been living with daily uncertainty.

Moving back to normal may not be an easy adjustment for many children who are still plagued by fears of getting sick, or their parents getting sick, who worry they are behind academically or have difficulty readjusting to the structure of the classroom.

And, it must not be forgotten that school teachers, administrators and support staff have experienced those same stressors, as well. The pandemic is a collective trauma, and being back to school fulltime may bring up different challenges for different people.

Moving forward, it's important to view this new school year as a time to provide for the intellectual and social development, the health and safety of children who have struggled with all of these things for too long.

Here are a few thoughts to help prepare you for a new, and life-giving, school year:

Reflect on your ministry—As Catholic school teachers you are called to reclaim the sacred in education, to help students understand that there is more to learning than information, more to knowing than facts. Extend an invitation to learn. Jesus used an invitation, "Come and see!" and look what happened. Invite your students to "Come and learn!" In the process, remember you are called to help each child begin to understand what it means to be a child of God. Like you.

Be prepared to listen—Listening is a critical skill for both academic learning and recognizing a student's emotional needs and potential stumbling blocks. When students believe they have been heard, they come to believe you really care about what they are saying. During this unique school year, allow students the opportunity to express their concerns and feelings, their ups and downs. Listening can be a powerful tool for healing.

Discover joy—This school year will be an important time for positivity and encouragement as a support for students and families, stemming from a joyful confidence in your faith. Jesus was undoubtedly a man of joy, and that joy of the Spirit was charismatic. Your students should have that same experience as you lead them on their academic and faith journey. Teach as Jesus did, and remember the words of St. Paul to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!" (4:4).

Know your stuff—This is a two-fold process. First, carefully review your teaching materials as early as possible before school begins, including the teacher guide in the books. When you know the material you are meant to be teaching, inspiration for lessons will appear in the most unexpected places. Secondly, evaluate your own knowledge of the Catholic faith and consider taking advantage of any parish or diocesan opportunities to deepen your knowledge.

Establish rules—Give this some thought before the school year starts. Classroom rules are essential to establishing a healthy and effective learning environment. Children need and feel safe in an environment with both limitations and freedoms,

and, of course, expectations. If you like to keep it simple, one effective rule to post on a blackboard or whiteboard is RESPECT. That one word can open up a meaningful discussion with students on what constitutes respect and how it is an important part of love. It also helps students, and teachers, develop patience, which will help if some children act out more than usual because of pandemic anxiety.

Stock up on stories—Children of all ages love stories. Jesus knew that, which is why he taught with parables—faith stories that are studied, reflected on and shared more than 2,000 years after Christ’s Death and Resurrection. Brief stories from your life are easiest told because you experienced them, but all of creation is full of inspiration (remember Jesus’ example of the hen gathering her chicks under her wings). And of course, there are always the saints. Take a look at RCL Benziger’s saints resource at <http://saintsresource.com>.

Pray—Prayer is essential for any ministry and for the growing spiritual life of each teacher, student, and family member involved in your Catholic school. When Jesus taught the Apostles to pray, he gave them the “Our Father.” Our Church has given us many other prayers to lift up our hearts and minds to God. In addition, our own spontaneous prayers, our conversations with God, are times of asking for guidance and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as we enter into this most important work of educating our children and creating disciples. Our participation in the celebration of Mass strengthens us to go out into the world, share the Gospel, and be Christ to others. For a prayer to begin the school year go to <https://www.rclbenziger.com/begin-school-year>, or see <https://www.rclbenziger.com/prayers-families>, which may be used for personal or family prayer, and adapted for the classroom. For a prayerful way to start the new school year, check out RCL/Benziger’s four page resource, *The Blessing of a New School Year*.

Create your own support team—In addition to creating relationships with your colleagues, it’s helpful to create a network of like-minded people who can be a social and emotional lifeline. It’s great to have staff meetings to share ideas, express concerns and work as team members, but it’s also imperative to have at least a small network comprised of those with whom you can connect to share your day, talk honestly, ask for insight or to vent occasionally. These people may be outside your teaching community, but are just as important, none-the-less.

Back-to-school this year may have its challenges, but it is also something that many children, and their families, have long awaited. It can be an exciting time of transition and opportunity for young hearts and spirits, well-served through the thoughtful preparation for which Catholic school educators are well-known.

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