

## Faith continues to inspire as Lloydminster celebrates 60 years of Catholic education

Brianna Wempe will soon be graduating from Lloydminster's Holy Rosary High School and heading to university in Ottawa. It's a stressful time with life-defining challenges, but faith is Wempe's essential support to get through it.

"Having my Christian Ethics teacher to talk about this and pray about it with them, it's really helpful," said the Grade 12 student. "The decision of university is a super-scary time, but I knew that I not only had my academic advisers; I also had that faith aspect to guide me through this journey into post-secondary."



**Nigel McCarthy**

Reflecting on the Lloydminster Catholic School Division's 60-year history, Director of Education Nigel McCarthy agrees that Catholic education is about going beyond the world of textbooks and assignments. Students are not just there to learn their ABCs, but to know they are children of God.

"As an environment of faith, it informs everything we do. It's infused into the daily life of students. Whether they're studying math, English, or history, they do so from a faith perspective," said McCarthy.

"Our world view is that we are people on a journey to God, and we've not yet arrived. We view the education of our students as a part of that journey that will continue for their whole lives."

In its 60 years, the Lloydminster Catholic School Division has gone from a single school in 1960 to today's six schools with 178 teachers and nearly 3,000 students. While the division's students and schools have continued to grow, the Catholic faith remains at the core.



Jason Almond, vice principal at Holy Rosary High School, is shown in a gymnasium holding a Wilson basketball and a tennis racket. He is wearing a dark suit, a light blue shirt, and a striped tie. The background shows a basketball court with other people and banners, including one that says 'WELCOME TO HOLY ROSARY' and another that says 'HOME OF THE LEADERS'.

“That is still first and foremost in the division,” said Jason Almond, vice principal at Holy Rosary High School. “We take it to a level where the respect for our faith is at the forefront.”

As a former student, teacher, and now vice-principal, Almond has spent nearly 40 combined years in Lloydminster’s Catholic School Division. Its schools have not only nurtured him in his education and subsequent teaching career; they also nurtured his faith.

“It’s brought me closer to God in my own faith journey, to be a more committed member of the Church,” said Almond.

“I attended a public school after Grade 9 because Lloydminster had no Catholic high school back then. Now, teenagers don’t always put faith at the top of their priorities, and I fell into that rut a little bit. But once I came to university, faith became a more important part of my life, and that’s only grown through my experience in the school division. Over the past 27 years I’ve taught here, I’ve hopefully worked to fill that void of my teenage years.”

When he first entered kindergarten in 1974 at St. Thomas Elementary, there were only two Catholic schools in the entire division, and Lloydminster’s population was under 12,000. Over 31,000 people now call Lloydminster home, and today the school division operates four elementary schools – Father Gorman, St. Joseph, École St. Thomas, and St. Mary – as well as Holy Rosary High and the Mother Teresa Early Childhood Education Centre.

For the past 11 years Almond has served as vice-principal at Holy Rosary, the division’s Grade 8-12 school. Faith life there includes monthly masses or prayer services and an annual Mass celebrated in the the gymnasium with the entire student body.

Programs such as Catholic Youth Leadership take faith beyond an academic study and onto a more personal level. Activities like volunteering, leading retreats for younger students and leading songs during Mass work to grow both the students' faith and their leadership skills.

For Almond, that bond between Church and school is the core strength of Catholic education.

“That triangle of communication – in terms of the schools, the families, and the churches – is really tight; there’s an open support for everyone,” he said. “When families are open to that faith education, it helps students grow even further as a person.”

But the present day also presents its share of challenges. The loss of faith caused by the Church’s sex abuse scandals and pressures from some groups to end public funding to Alberta’s Catholic schools have created anxieties for the future.

“The Catholic Church and Catholic education has been, for lack of a better word, under attack the past number of years,” said Almond. “There’s a lot of things, in the media and elsewhere, that have not been positive for the Church, the clergy and so on. These issues can bring a lot of negativity out there.”

The prevalence of social media today is also a concern for Almond, as it can create new environments for peer pressure and bullying. But he feels the best way to address this concern is to emphasize the consolation of the Catholic faith, and particularly for young people, the Christian teachings of charity and forgiveness.

“It makes it very difficult, but we continue to stay positive and let students know we care for them. We know they make mistakes and may not make good choices sometimes, but we care and want to help them turn things around to do better.

“We strive to have students who, through the teachings of Jesus, know forgiveness and put the needs of others first.”



**Brianna Wempe**

In the fall Brianna Wempe will be studying in Ottawa for an honours bachelor's degree in commerce, and she intends to bring her prayer life with her.

"It's something you can always fall back on if you're having a bad day or a tough class," she said. "I hope to keep faith a part of my education for sure."

The division celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the football field near Holy Rosary School on World Catholic Education Day, May 30.

Seeing Archbishop Richard Smith and fellow clergy gathered together with the 3,000 students, McCarthy said it was a moment that expressed the powerful role the Church plays in keeping communities together.

"That was a moment where that shared faith really becomes crystallized in our experiences."

Along with continued growth, McCarthy sees one of the division's biggest accomplishments as its role in establishing the Synergy Vault, the large indoor field next to Holy Rosary that allows the people of Lloydminster to play football, soccer, or baseball even when it's -40° outside.

Looking ahead, Almond and McCarthy agree that the biggest challenge facing the division today is how to stay on top of their growing numbers. With four elementary schools feeding into only one high school, McCarthy hopes they will find ways to increase space at Holy Rosary to ensure the school can accommodate as many future students as possible.

"To accommodate the children we presently have in our elementary, our high school has to expand," he said. "It's a wonderful challenge to have, and it's one we are working on moving forward."

"Catholic education is about resiliency. It's a journey we can always improve

upon, and I think recognizing that bodes well for where the Catholic division will be in the next 60 years.”