

Mass to Open the School Year
STAR Catholic School Division

[*1Cor. 1: 1-9; Psalm 145; Matthew 24: 42-51*]

The first thing that I'd like to say to everyone this morning is thank you. My sense of gratitude embraces many things, when I think of all that has been happening in our school contexts since the outbreak of the pandemic. Enormous pressure has been placed upon teachers, staff, administration and parents as you all strove mightily to enable the students to continue their learning and celebrate their achievements. The students, too, had many big adjustments to make. I am very proud of all that has unfolded in our Catholic schools these past months. Thank you.

My feeling of gratitude remains strong at this moment of student return. This, too, has called forth from everyone immense effort and bold creativity to make the re-entry work. Will learning be in-person or online? Who wears masks? Do we design special student cohorts? How? In what ways can we remain in effective dialogue with medical authorities? This only touches the surface, I'm sure, but it indicates the depth and breadth of complexity that is involved this year in being ready for the return of the students.

It is precisely this present imperative – being ready for return – that can help us break open the message of Sacred Scripture this morning. Both readings – the Gospel passage from St. Matthew and the text from *1Corinthians* – address the issue of readiness for return, the return of the Lord Jesus. Nothing is more important than that return, so clearly we both want and need to be ready.

As you've been preparing for the return of the students, you have had to deal with something that really drives school administrators around the bend: uncertainty. Shifting numbers of infections, changing opinions of parents, and the rather frequent movement of the goalposts have made contingency planning the order of the day. In an environment where lesson plans are prepared ahead of time and in specific detail, and where the schedule of meetings and events is established months in advance, contingency usually has a hard time finding any room. This year, by dint of circumstance, it has come barging in rather forcefully. Readiness has become dynamic, fluid and very much focused upon the present moment.

Think of this and ponder the return of the Lord. What is certain is that he will come again. The Church has always understood this primarily in two ways: when he comes in glory at the end of time, and when he comes to us at the end of our earthly lives. What is uncertain is that we know not when. There is no timeline! He doesn't work with us to see how it might best fit into the schedule. We simply do not know, cannot know and shall not know. The implication for readiness is clear: here, too, it must be fluid, dynamic and focused upon the present moment. The time to be ready to meet the Lord is now. Our state of preparedness must be constant.

Now, I've heard that in some divisions, perhaps in all of them, surveys have been sent out to parents to determine what their preference is for the way their children will resume their learning, the safety measures they want to see in place, the protocols to be followed and so on. Well, no survey will be sent ahead to us by the Lord. His return, and the act of judgment

accompanying it, will be entirely on his terms, not ours. Yet that does not mean we are left guessing. Just as parents and teachers want nothing more than to set their children and students up for success, the Lord wants to do the same for us, infinitely more so. This is why our Heavenly Father sent Jesus in the first place; this is why the Lord taught us in parables to place our faith entirely in him and in the love of the Father, it's why he gave us the Beatitudes, and why he described in detail the "final exam" that will probe how we have served him in the least of our brothers and sisters. This is also why the Lord established the Church, with its teaching authority to steer us in the right direction and the sacraments through which he pours out his grace that enables us to be faithful. He has given us what we require to be ready. Today's parable reminds us that we must be faithful stewards of all that he has entrusted to us in order to be found ready.

So, as we are in the midst of doing all that we can to be ready for the return of the students, let's keep in mind that we need to be ready for the Lord's return, and that we've been entrusted with the responsibility of helping our students to be ready also. For this we need the help of divine grace. Therefore, let's pray with St. Paul that we not be lacking in any spiritual gift and that God will strengthen us to the end, so that we shall all be found blameless – ready - on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
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Memorial of Saint Monica