Catholic schools in the Diocese of Austin offer excellent academic and outstanding faith-inspired instruction for students in Central Texas. In a constant effort to achieve this enthusiastic combination, the witness of student transformation, community impact and the importance of compassionate service to others in each of our 22 Catholic schools is amazing. A couple of middle school students from Holy Family Catholic School in Austin shared their story of real transformation and growth in faith that occurs when students are in a nurturing, supportive, and Catholic educational environment.

The testimonies of Kevin Riek, eighth grade and parents of Teresa Selvaraj, seventh grade, are inspirational and full of hope.
Q Has your perspective changed since you have attended Holy Family? In what ways?
A Yes. It has changed in that my faith is my lifestyle—it’s not just something for Sunday—it’s something that is part of every day. Each day I’m encouraged to live by the teachings of Jesus and to be kind to others. I love the Hobbit/The Lord of the Rings and one of my favorite Gandalf lines is, “It is the small things—everyday deeds of ordinary folk—that keeps the darkness at bay. Simple acts of kindness and love.” I think that Holy Family has helped me to understand the meaning of this.

Q What has been the most memorable activity/opportunity that you have been a part of at Holy Family? Why?
A Speaking events. It’s tough to make the finals in speaking contests because there are so many good competitors, but at Holy Family we have constant support and guidance from teachers and friends. I feel that I could not do it without them and every time I advance I’m really happy because I feel like my hard work and theirs has paid off.

Q What qualities do you feel you have gained from attending Holy Family? Why?
A I feel I have gained openness, friendliness and kindness. Holy Family encourages its students to challenge themselves, make friends and explore their interests.

Q What do you enjoy most about Holy Family? Why?
A It has a great school community. I feel that everyone is welcome and the students can build their friendships, knowing that they can trust and depend on their classmates.

Q If you could say anything about the school to a new student what would you say?
A Don’t be afraid to be yourself. You can be open with others because Holy Family inspires and fosters respect for others. Plus, you’ll have opportunities to find something you enjoy—from sports to one-act play to robotics to Quiz Bowl to student council to music to altar servers. There’s something for everybody.

Q What else would you like to add?
A One of my favorite things about Holy Family is that when I come back from a day away, like a sick day, my classmates always greet me with “Kevin is back!” We do this for everyone because everyone is an important part of our group.

Q Tell us about Teresa.
A When Teresa was in Pre-K she didn’t use a cane to walk around the campus. Her classmates would hold her hand and take her around when she couldn’t see clearly in the bright sunlight, or on the playground. She can’t tell certain colors apart like blue, black or green, but her friends would pick out the color she needed and give them to her. During PE they would steer clear of not bumping into her or throwing a ball to her while playing catch. They were her guardian angels always watching over her. They still look out for her.

Q What has Holy Family meant to you? Why?
A Holy Family School gave us hope that our daughter could thrive in a main stream school, which wasn’t equipped to assist her. She was always looked after by her teachers and classmates who helped her whenever she was in need.

Q Has your perspective changed since you have attended Holy Family? In what ways?
A We have developed greater respect for the staff who give of themselves unselfishly. We have been very happy with how the school is not just Catholic in name, but every aspect of the education is centered around the church and the sacraments. We always share our experience of Holy Family Catholic School with other families who have children with similar disabilities, so that they can send their child to a private school like Holy Family. Holy Family has always made every effort to help Teresa thrive and excel.

Q What has been the most memorable activity/opportunity that you have been a part of at Holy Family? Why?
A We have never been able to participate in any sports due to Teresa’s condition. This year she joined the Robotics team and we have participated in it as a family, giving us an opportunity to give back to the school.

Q What do you enjoy most about Holy Family? Why?
A The small community feel because everyone lifts up the other in their times of distress and need.

Q Teresa, if you could say anything about the school to a new student what would you say?
A They have never treated me as a student with a disability, and have always made me feel like a normal student this is a truly unique school which has welcomed me with open arms.
“The Jubilee year will close with the liturgical Solemnity of Christ the King on 20 November 2016. On that day, as we seal the Holy Door, we shall be filled, above all, with a sense of gratitude and thanksgiving to the Most Holy Trinity for having granted us an extraordinary time of grace. We will entrust the life of the Church, all humanity, and the entire cosmos to the Lordship of Christ, asking him to pour out his mercy upon us like the morning dew, so that everyone may work together to build a brighter future.”
– Pope Francis, Misericordiae Vultus, 5

I used to wonder why high school and college graduation ceremonies were called “commencement exercises.” Weren’t they celebrating the “end” of something — as in, no more classes, exams, assignments or the other restrictions that came with getting an education? But, as we know, the granting of the diploma launches the graduate into a new chapter in their life, one in which formal education will be put to practical use for both the student and the larger community.

The Jubilee Year of Mercy drew to a close on Nov. 20, 2016. In some ways, it seems as if the year has just begun. And yet, isn’t this the point?

In December 2015, Pope Francis invited us all to go “back to school” — the school of mercy. The Jubilee Year wasn’t designed to introduce any new dogmas or groundbreaking religious practices. Rather, it was meant to be a “refresher course,” a series of exercises to help us receive, understand, and share the limitless, compassionate love of Christ, who invites us to be “merciful like the Father.”

Some of those exercises were very concrete. Some people went on pilgrimages and walked through Holy Doors. Some returned to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, many after a long absence. Still others reacquainted themselves with the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy — and put them into practice. Whether “opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society,” or finding new ways to live mercifully within our own families and parish communities, we watched, listened and learned.

November 20 concluded the Jubilee Year, but make no mistake: it’s a new day. Now is our commencement. May the fountain of God’s mercy, unsealed in each one of us, never run dry.

“From the heart of the Trinity, from the depths of the mystery of God, the great river of mercy wells up and overflows unceasingly. It is a spring that will never run dry, no matter how many people draw from it. Every time someone is in need, he or she can approach it, because the mercy of God never ends.”
– Pope Francis, Misericordiae Vultus, 25
Faith Weisbruch, a junior at Holy Trinity Catholic High School in Temple, is the President of the student Pro-Life Club. She said she’s blessed to have been raised in a family that is centered on the abundance and sanctity of life. As one of six children, she is grateful that her parents have inspired her passion for life.

Under Faith’s leadership the Pro-Life Club at Holy Trinity works to raise awareness of the Pro-Life movement. The members advocate for life within the school community by encouraging their fellow students to stand-up for the rights of the unborn, the sick, the elderly and the vulnerable. “Being in a Catholic environment is a good thing. The students are open to a lot of ideas supporting life and that’s beautiful to see,” Faith said. Throughout the month of October, the Pro-Life Club held a Pro-Life Baby Shower to collect baby items for Our Lady of the Angels Maternity Shelter, which provides shelter to women in crisis pregnancies and offers post-partum women and their children a loving and stable family environment. Members of the club delivered the donations to the shelter during the last week of October. The group also plans to host a “Honk for Life” event on West Adams in Temple to promote life in the greater Temple area. “Taking a stand for life is a beautiful witness and I’m happy to be in an environment that supports that,” she said.
The V Encuentro is a four-year process of ecclesial reflection and evangelization that invites all Catholics in the United States to intense missionary activity, consultation, leadership development, and the identification of best ministerial practices in the spirit of the New Evangelization.

Notice the inclusion “all Catholics!” The first objective of the V Encuentro is to “call all Catholics in the United States to become authentic and joyful missionary disciples that give witness to God’s love with a prophetic voice in a culturally diverse Church.” The V Encuentro is all embracing! It is for all of us, Hispanics and non-Hispanics alike! Its call echoes that of our Holy Father Pope Francis, who, in the first sentences of his landmark Apostolic Exhortation The Joy of the Gospel, exclaims: “The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness...I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church’s journey in years to come.”

We here in Central Texas should immediately recognize those initial sentences from the Holy Father as the words introducing our own Diocesan Pastoral Plan, Encounter that Leads to Transformation. And notice the common word “encounter” (in Spanish, encuentro). Our Diocesan Pastoral Plan, the V Encuentro, and Pope Francis’s entire pontificate proclaim the “New Evangelization,” connecting our “encounter” with Jesus to our becoming his Spirit-filled “missionary disciples.”

To be more specific, the V Encuentro is a movement of the Church that has embraced four large assemblies of Hispanic/Latino Catholic leaders. It has incorporated detailed processes of formation and follow-up before and after each event. The V Encuentro, already in process, will include parish leadership development between January and July of 2017, a Diocesan Encuentro assembly in the fall of that year, a regional Encuentro in early 2018, and a National Encuentro in Grapevine, Texas in the fall of that year. Continuing formation in evangelization will follow through 2020.

Why single out Hispanics/Latinos? One reason is that our Hispanic/Latino brothers and sisters are rapidly becoming the majority of Catholics in the United States, already exceeding 40% and over 60% of those under 35. Youth and young adult ministry in our Church is hugely Hispanic! Over 65% of Catholics in our Diocese are Latinos! Sheer numbers call us to action!

What characterizes the entire Encuentro movement is a passion to affirm Hispanics/Latinos as a prophetic voice (in Spanish, voz profetica) for evangelization, intercultural solidarity, community building, and healing of an increasingly polarized United States. Pope Saint John Paul II, in his talk at San Antonio’s Plaza Guadalupe in 1987, spoke of the Hispanic Heritage of the Southwest as “very important for the Church. Spanish was the language of the first evangelizers of this continent, precisely in this region.” Saint John Paul went on to challenge today’s Latinos: “It is your turn to be evangelizers, of each other and of all those whose faith is weak or who have not yet given themselves to the Lord. May you be no less zealous in evangelization and in Christian service than your forebears!” Make your parish, he urged, a “family of families.”

Pope John Paul, in his Apostolic Exhortation The Church in America, promulgated in that same Basilica in 1999, wrote this: “In America, the mestiza face of the Virgin of Guadalupe was from the start a symbol of the inculturation of the Gospel, of which she has been the lodestar and the guide. Through her powerful intercession, the Gospel will penetrate the hearts of the men and women of America and permeate their cultures, transforming them from within.”

Let us accompany our Hispanic/Latino brothers and sisters in making this happen!

Visit www.encuentro.org for more information on the V Encuentro.
St. Thomas Aquinas is the patron saint of colleges, universities, and schools. The author of the Summa Theologica, he is honored as the “Angelic Doctor” and was one of the greatest teachers of the medieval Church. His family hoped he would become a Benedictine and sent him off to be educated at the Abbey at Montecassino when he was just five years old! An able and eager student, he was inspired by the Dominicans he met later at the university, and in spite of being kidnapped and held prisoner for a time by his father, he joined that order and completed his studies under St. Albert the Great. He taught for several years and, in the service of Pope Urban IV, wrote many philosophical and theological works. These are his greatest gift to the Church, and more than seven centuries later, the revised Code of Canon Law still directs that St. Thomas Aquinas “in particular” should be the teacher of those preparing for priesthood. We are the beneficiaries of his good stewardship of his gifts of faith and intellect. May we grow in wisdom by his teachings and in holiness by imitating his faith.

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