

REGISTER

What Parents Want: Honor Roll Names Top Catholic Schools

By TIM DRAKE
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GREENVILLE, S.C. - Parents Michael and Paula McGarry want a Catholic education for their children that is both academically challenging and Catholic - and that means having the sacraments readily available.

On Oct. 18, the school they chose was named one of the nation's top 50 Catholic high schools by the first Catholic High School Honor Roll for doing both.

The couple told the Register that living in the Bible Belt, their children are inundated by other non-Catholic denominations and challenged with what it means to be Catholic.

"We wanted to put our children in an environment where that is defended," said Michael. "It's expensive, but you never lose sight that this is a Catholic school."

At St. Joseph's Catholic School, faculty members each fall take an oath of fidelity to Church teachings. Now, that school is being recognized by the Acton Institute, a Catholic organization that wants to promote Catholic identity in secondary schools.

"We were thrilled by the news," said Keith Kiser, headmaster at St. Joseph's, the only Catholic high school in upstate South Carolina. "My board chair said we've known this about ourselves for a while. It's amazing that an outside organization has recognized it as well. It's a little gift from God."

Kiser has two tests for the school's faculty. "They need to be competent in their field and love what they are teaching, and they need to be fully committed to the Catholic Church and the truth about the human person," he said.

An independ project of the Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, the Honor Roll sought to identify schools like St. Joseph's that are educating their students effectively, integrating the Catholic faith, and preparing students for active engagement with the world.

The Honor Roll reflects the diversity of Catholicism in the United States.

"We felt the criteria they were looking for matched our strengths," said Dominican Sister Elizabeth Anne Allen, principal of Mount de Sales Academy, another Honor Roll honoree, in Catonsville, Md.

Those strengths include academic but also spiritual. A chapel is in the center of the school building and students regularly read papal encyclicals and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Religion classes use only those textbooks that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has identified as being in conformity with the Catechism.

Mount de Sales was one of two schools operated by the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia - the "Nash-

ville Dominicans" - to be recognized by the Honor Roll; the other is St. Cecilia's Academy in Nashville.

Catholic High School Honor Roll board member Gerard Bradley, Professor of Law at the University of Notre Dame, said the Honor Roll will serve as a benchmark for all who are seeking an education informed by faith. "It draws attention to schools that are contributing in extraordinary ways to the moral and intellectual formation of young people," he said.

The Honor Roll schools ranged from the 23 student Holly Rosary Academy in Anchorage, Alaska to St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., with 2,100 students. Illinois, with seven schools selected, had the highest number of schools on the list, followed by Texas (with five), New York and Ohio (with four each). In all, schools from 25 states made the Honor Roll. A complete list of the schools can be seen on the Catholic High School Honor Roll Web site at chshonor.org.

The list included diocesan, independent, all-boy, all-girl, and coed institutions and even one that has not yet received formal approval by the local bishop.

"It reflects the diversity of Catholicism in the United States," said Kevin Schmiesing, the project's director. "What is common too all of the schools is an outstanding commitment to the educational mission of the Church."

Todd Flanders, headmaster of another honoree, Providence Acad-

emy" in Plymouth, Minn., agreed.

"The Honor Roll is an interesting way too look for and encourage commonalities among all kinds of Catholic school experiments," Flanders said. "We need to know that we are working together in common."

Providence was one of the newer schools on the list. Opened in 2001, it now has 595 students in pre-K through 12th grade, and will be graduating its first class of seniors next spring.

In addition to the fine Honor Roll, the Acton Institute also published the top 20 finalists in three categories that it felt was important to overall excellence: academics; Catholic identity, and civic education.

Criteria

Preparations for the Honor Roll were made last fall. This spring, all Catholic high schools were invited to apply for inclusion in the Honor Roll by completing three surveys. The surveys were filled out by the principal, a teacher in the theology department and an educator in the social studies/economics area. Approximately 250 schools responded. Schools were scored by averaging the score from each of the three main criteria.

Points were awarded based on the school's commitment to or achievement in each area. For example, for the academic survey, PSAT, ACT or SAT scores over two years were averaged, in addition to points for AP course work offered.

Schools also received points for high percentages of Catholic students and faculty and for having priests on staff. In the civic education component points were awarded for offering and requiring econom-

ics and civics/government courses.

For Catholic identity, points were awarded for use of textbooks that appeared on the USCCB's list of texts in conformity with the Catechism. To assess the sacramental character of a school, Schmiesing said the survey inquired as to the number of voluntary and mandatory Masses offered each week, as well as reflective questions regarding Catholic social teaching and magisterial doctrine.

Sister Elizabeth Anne Allen believes it's the faith life that sets Mount de Sales Academy apart.

The Honor Roll will be a useful resource for parents, students, and potential donors who want to assess the character of a school.

"The chapel is in the very center of the building," she explained. "When students leave here and go to college, they say that a chapel is the first thing they look for. You can't be that close to the Blessed Sacrament and not be affected by it. You can have both academic excellence and a sacramental life, not academic excellence instead of a sacramental life."

The Honor Roll was not without its critics, such as the National Catholic Educational Association. "The NCEA called with questions," said Schmiesing, "They didn't like the idea of ranking schools or saying that some schools are better than others." The NCEA did not return the Register's telephone calls regarding the Honor Roll.

Schmiesing said that along with the Honor Roll, the Acton Institute was also making available the ques-

tions that were asked, so that interested readers can see what they were able to measure and what they were not.

"The goal of the Honor Roll is not to identify problematic schools," Schmiesing said. "We believe there is such a thing as excellence, and that we can strive to improve in certain areas."

Schmiesing also admitted that early on he had heard some criticism in response to their original mailing from principals who felt that college preparatory schools would have a distinct advantage over schools with an open admission policy. Schmiesing said the Honor Roll results showed otherwise.

"Very small schools, open admission schools, and new schools made the list," said Schmiesing. "Those kinds of schools can be just as competitive."

"The kinds of things the Honor Roll is trying to recognize, we opened up trying to do well," said Flanders. "Our integration of fidelity to the faith, commitment to traditional academic excellence, and commitment to civics are the kinds of things that I usually talk about at our open houses."

Schmiesing hopes that the Honor Roll will be a useful resource for parents, students, and potential donors who want to assess the character of a school.

"Overall, the response of the schools has been one of excitement," said Schmiesing. "They seem very pleased and are talking about publicizing this in various ways. One school hopes to produce pins that the girls at the school could wear."

Tim Drake writes from Saint Cloud, Minnesota.