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St. Joseph's named a top 50 school

By Paul A. Barra

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GREENVILLE - In just its 11th year of existence, St. Joseph's Catholic School has achieved the distinction of being named to the 2004 Catholic High School Honor Roll, ranking it among the top 50 Catholic secondary schools in the nation.

Known as St. Joseph's Catholic School since the addition of its middle school last year the private institution was also listed among the top 20 American Catholic high schools academically. Both rankings place St. Joseph's alongside such legendary academies as All Hallows, a Christian Brothers school in the Bronx; the Jesuit-run Creighton Prep in Omaha, Neb.; and St. Thomas Aquinas High School of Miami's archdiocese. St. Joseph's is one of only 13 schools in the South to make the honor roll, and the only one in South Carolina. Texas led the South with five schools named in the top 50.

The ranking energized the faculty and administration of the school, but it didn't surprise everyone.

"This is an affirmation of what we have known for the past couple of years," said Keith Kiser, headmaster. "Still, it's nice when a national organization of this caliber recognizes the fine job done by our faculty and staff and the hard work of our students."

The high-caliber organization referred to by Kiser is the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, named after Lord John Acton ("Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" Its board of advisors include presidents and professors from such colleges as John Hopkins, Fordham, the Pontifical College Josephinum and Michigan State. The project director for the honor roll Kevin Schmiesing, said that the top 50 included a few independent schools, as well as those run by different religious orders and dioceses.

"(The list) reflects the diversity of Catholicism in the United States," Schmiesing said. "What is common to all these schools is outstanding commitment to the educational mission of the church."

For St. Joseph's that means an SAT average last year of 1218 (200 points better than the national average), seven National Merit semifinalists in the past two years and \$2.3 million in grants and scholarship offers for the 49 graduates of 2004. In addition to honors and Advanced Placement classes, the school offers a grade-level curriculum as well as the Thomas Aquinas Program for students with mild learning disabilities.

Kiser credits a rigorous selection process for teachers, based on demonstrated competence in their field and a firm commitment to the Catholic faith, for much of the success the school

has achieved. He also said that the amount of work the students put into their studies is "heroic."

"That's what makes a great Catholic school," the head of school said. Pauline Bellavance, the physics teacher at the 400-student school, said that the Honor Roll designation surprised her since the school is so new and was competing with hundreds of more established institutions.

"But I was pleased, because the school should get that kind of recognition," Bellavance said. "This is a top-notch college prep school with high standards."

She is particularly impressed with the administration's emphasis on discipline, after hearing so many horror stories in the public schools of the state, and with the way the teachings of the Catholic Church are incorporated into the daily life of St. Joe's.

The bishop of the Diocese of Charleston was also pleased with the award.

"It is recognition well-deserved as the board of directors, headmaster, faculty, staff, students and community have worked very hard in a short time to make the school what it is today," Bishop Robert J. Baker said. "I am proud and happy that St. Joseph's is located in the Diocese of Charleston in the state of South Carolina."

St. Joseph's Catholic School is not a diocesan school but is recognized by Bishop Baker as a Catholic institution. It was founded in 1993 by nine lay people who perceived a need for a Catholic secondary school in the Upstate and who backed the school both financially and legally. It remains a lay apostolate, although Kiser believes that it represents Catholicism on a broader scale.

"The diocese and the Piedmont Deanery can share in this honor, too. They can boast of having one of the country's best, right here, right now," the headmaster said. "This is a Catholic school for the deanery, and we want to operate from the heart of the church."

More than 250 Catholic schools applied for the Honor Roll, according to the Acton Institute Web site, and about 1,300 schools are eligible. The designation of the top 50 award is based on three factors: academic excellence, Catholic identity and civic education. Kiser believes the Honor Roll designation will be a boon for college admissions; St. Joe's graduates have already been accepted into Duke, West Point, Emory, Virginia Military Institute, Middlebury and more than 100 other colleges and universities.

Editor's note: Paul Barra is a teacher at St. Joseph's, as well as a correspondent for The Miscellany.