

Father O'Connor's Homily for 25 January 2026
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time-A
Catholic Schools Week
Word of God Sunday

Isaiah 8: 23--9: 3
1 Corinthians 1: 10-13, 17
Matthew 4: 12-23

To our Saint Joseph Parish School families, our dedicated teachers, staff and volunteers – and those of our area Catholic day schools, high schools and colleges – happy Catholic Schools Week!

I am very happy to announce that Mrs. Amy Makruski, who is the Principal of our Saint Joseph Parish School and the Coordinator of our Saint Joseph Parish School of Religion, received an award before Christmas from the Diocesan Office of Catholic Education “in recognition of Academic Excellence.” This award “honors strong leadership and inspires continuous improvement.” The letter of commendation concludes with these words addressed to her: “Thank you for making a difference in the lives of children by prioritizing their academic growth.”

Thank you, and congratulations to Mrs. Amy Makruski!

And to all of you, our Saint Joseph and Nativity Parish Family members – we have a school together. Thank you for your commitment to and support for Catholic education!

There is an easy way for all who pay taxes to the State of Ohio to help our Catholic schools financially – at no cost at all to the donor. It is called the Angel Scholarship Fund. Contributions to the Angel Scholarship Fund provide tuition assistance for students who attend a Catholic school, K-12. And donors may receive a tax credit of up to \$750 for single persons – and up to \$1500 for married couples who are filing jointly – against their Ohio State tax liability.

In other words, the State of Ohio allows you to “spend” some of the state income taxes – that you must pay anyway – in order to provide tuition assistance for students in our Catholic schools – including right here at Saint Joseph Parish School in Amherst – which you may designate as the recipient of your tax credit.

And some more good news: the Angel Scholarship Fund 2025 deadline has been extended until 15 April 2026. Thank you to all of you who have already signed-up. There is more information about this Angel Scholarship Fund opportunity in the flyers at the doorways of the church and in this weekend’s bulletin [on the second page, in the top right-hand corner].

Tourists were visiting the famous Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. While they were below the ground in a giant cave, the lights went out. Among those trapped in the darkness were an eight-year-old boy and his five-year-old sister.

It was a scary situation, especially for children. And the little girl began to cry. Then her older brother put his arm around her and said, “Don’t worry, little sister. There’s a man up there who knows how to turn the lights back on.”

This is also Word of God Sunday. As we look at today’s Scripture readings, that boy’s reassuring words to his frightened sister sound a bit like the prophecy of Isaiah in the First Reading. And it is the same prophecy that Matthew applies to the coming of Jesus in today’s Gospel:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.”

Before the coming of Jesus, the world was dark and scary, even more than the Carlsbad Caverns after the lights went out. The darkness of sin and death caused many people to cry out in fear. And Isaiah the prophet promised that God would send a great light to banish the darkness. And that promise was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

We are called as disciples of Jesus to carry His light courageously into our shadowy world, remembering that it is His light that we bear and share. We just sang in the Responsorial Psalm: “The Lord is my light and my salvation” [Psalm 27: 1]. As we sing: “We are the light of the world. May our light shine before all, that they may see the good that we do, and give glory to God” [Breaking Bread Hymnal, #603, “We Are the Light of the World”].

Spiritual writers tell us that what happened to ancient Israel, in the days of Isaiah the prophet, can still happen to us as individuals. There are times when the lights seem to go out and we are left in the darkness, feeling alone and afraid: with the death of someone that we dearly love, a divorce, a misunderstanding with a friend, the smashed dreams of a business venture, the loss of health and memory and mobility.... These experiences, and many others like them, can throw our lives into darkness.

But when tragedy and disappointment strike us, we need to remember Isaiah’s reassuring prophecy: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.”

Or as the little boy told his frightened sister, “Don’t worry. There’s a man up there who knows how to turn the lights back on.”

There is a hymn text that was written by the British Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman [1801-1890; canonized a saint in 2019] in 1833. It describes his search for the right path to follow, when things were dark in his life and he was far from home.

He wrote it as a young Church of England cleric returning by ship from Italy to his native England. While the ship was detained in Sicily, Newman became seriously ill and nearly died. During his time of recovery, he wrote the following lines:

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom.
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home.
Lead Thou me on.
Keep Thou my feet. I do not ask to see
the distant scene. One step enough for me.

Saint John Newman's words are full of hope. They were written at the height of his Anglican influence, and foreshadowed his entry into full communion with the Catholic Church twelve years later,

They were written for people like us who would like – who badly need – a greater sense of hope in everyday circumstances.

Newman's words set the tone: "One step enough for me." Sometimes that's all we need. Just a little bit of good news can pack a powerful punch of grace.

That is how hope works. It is not always particularly reasonable, or dependent on what seems so apparent or likely. Hope is all because Jesus is real: the cross, the empty tomb, all of it.

What evidence-based judgment does an alcoholic have to think he can quit drinking? All the evidence seems to be stacked against him. And yet, he goes one minute, one hour, one day, one week. He is led to a new place with a whole new rhythm of life. He becomes someone who does not drink anymore, but he cannot ever dare to walk alone. It never stops being one step at a time.

Sometimes things are just really bad for us – like they were for Newman, seriously ill and alone on an island where he did not know the language, and did not know the Catholic religion of the place. But the Lord was there with him.

We may forget God, but God never forgets us.

Until the day when we take our last steps toward Him, I pray that we keep following where He leads – one step at a time.

Isaiah the prophet encourages us: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.”

Or as the boy comforted his frightened little sister: “Don’t worry. There’s a man up there who knows how to turn the lights back on.”

As we sing in the hymn: “We are the light of the world. May our light shine before all, that they may see the good that we do, and give glory to God.”

And as Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman prayed:

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom.

Lead Thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home.

Lead Thou me on.

Keep Thou my feet. I do not ask to see
the distant scene. One step enough for me.

Yes, one step enough for us all.