

ASSUMPTION
CATHOLIC
SCHOOLS IN
WISCONSIN
RAPIDS



VIRTUES FOR THE WIN

STORY
BY AMY
EICHSTEADT

ASSUMPTION CATHOLIC SCHOOLS' SPORTS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM YIELDS BENEFITS SYSTEM-WIDE

"Sports contribute to the love of life, teaches sacrifice, respect and responsibility, leading to the full development of every human person." —Pope St. John Paul II

Good things are happening at Assumption Catholic Schools (ACS) in Wisconsin Rapids! The school system's mission is "to inspire excellence and personal growth grounded in Catholic principles and tradition." In recent years, there has been a renewed effort towards this aim as well as making Catholic identity the center of all decisions and departments, events and extracurriculars. The "Virtue=Strength" program is a clear example.

Physical education teacher and varsity assistant football coach Joseph Rayles began teaching at Assumption High School in 2017. That year, former principal Paul Klinkhammer noted that the school was missing an intentional virtue curriculum. Because athletics are a big part of the school culture, Mr. Klinkhammer asked Mr. Rayles to research options for bringing virtues into the athletic program. After doing his research, Mr. Rayles decided the best fit would be with "Sports Leader" (now "Virtue=Strength"), a program he was familiar with from a previous coaching job in Michigan.

"Virtue=Strength" was founded in Louisville, Ky., in 2004 by Paul Passafiume, a generous business-

man and coach who "saw the world of sports drifting away from its original ideals" and recognized the need to infuse virtue back into athletics. According to the program's website: "For nearly 20 years, "Virtue=Strength" has provided Catholic school [and parish] leaders with a proven and flexible system for engaging the hearts and minds of students, strengthening them in virtue and inspiring them with the joy of Catholic life." The program focuses on three pillars: virtue, ceremony and Catholic identity.

Participating schools get a layout of the virtues for the four-year strategic plan, as well as extensive content for every week of the school year. Content contains virtues (like diligence, mortification, generosity and perseverance) and corresponding





vices with definitions, prayers and guidance on how to integrate the virtues into practice.

Lou Judd, the “Virtue=Strength” executive director, edits the program’s content as well as trains and supports schools. He has worked alongside Paul from the beginning and is encouraged daily by the fruits that continue to come from the ever-expanding program.

STUDENTS AND TEACHERS BUY IN

Lou arrived at Assumption High School in the spring of 2019 to present “Virtue=Strength” to coaches and staff. Mr. Rayles worked with Lou to customize the program for the upcoming school year, tailoring it to their needs. Every school is unique and there is no one size fits all.

Each school can adjust their program year-to-year, if needed. Every year, the implementation has looked a little different, starting as an athletics-only leadership program in the high school. ACS students returned for the 2020-2021 school year to an altered learning environment due to COVID-19 restrictions. Committed to the program and his students, Mr. Rayles continued the weekly virtues and vices program during “Royal Time” (homeroom). He used recognizable songs, videos and posed relevant questions to help students understand and integrate the virtues into their lives and to avoid the corresponding vices. Moving forward, teachers of the elementary and middle schools were also encouraged to integrate these virtues into their classrooms, and the high school teachers were asked to reinforce it.

Middle school religion and social studies teacher Joe Diedrich finds the program to be a great asset to his classroom, stating, “I’ve found these lessons to be succinct, direct and profound in their impact with my students. I’ve been able to share them in my own style.” Every day of the week, Mr. Diedrich features a special, short segment to pique students’ interest: Miracle Monday, Eucharist Tuesday, Walking Saint Wednesday, Pick One Thursday and Unpronounceable Saint Friday.

Today, everyone is encouraged to use the program: teacher or coach, student or athlete. Implementation is not meant to be time-consuming or difficult. It is a natural and brief addition to the

classroom or huddle and has the potential to produce profound effects. High school teacher Jan Minarcin posts the weekly virtues on her board and reminds students to practice them throughout the week. At first, it was out of duty, but “as the year went along, a crazy thing happened to me,” Ms. Minarcin shares. “As I would note the virtue and look for its practice in my students, I would find it. Rarely did a week go by where I was unable to find a practice of the focused virtue. As a teacher, I began to expect to find the practice, and in that, I changed.”

Every Friday, teachers and coaches nominate students who exemplify the weekly virtue. Recognizing their achievements at an assembly, Mr. Rayles presents nominees with a framed certificate, and Principal James “Jimmy” Lynch provides each student with a candy bar as a reward. “At first, there appeared a typical disinterest from the student body,” Ms. Minarcin continues. “[But] after only a few weeks of students being recognized, a considerable shift happened. Students began to take notice of the virtue and who was being recognized. Today, students receive the award with a bit of humility.”

Now, students and staff alike are eager to see who will be selected. Sophomore athlete, Carter Pavloski, shares, “I like that such a diverse group of people in the school receive awards for reflecting their virtues.”

The “ceremony” pillar of the program evangelizes by giving students an opportunity to build Catholic memories and introduce non-Catholics to the Faith. In accordance with the liturgical year, the ceremonies include school blessings, Eucharistic processions and Masses. Lou explains that these ceremonies “help students experience the rich tradition of Catholic culture as a means for growth in virtue ... They open the door to show them what it is and teach them the beauty. Then we pray that it will attract them to it.” Many have been attracted, as eight ACS students came into the Church this spring.

Another way ACS uses the program for evangelization is by sharing the weekly virtue slide with families through the president’s blog, keeping them connected with what is happening in the schools. ACS president Dan Minter is pleased with the program and how it has “provided an opportunity for both our athletic and academic programs to help students grow in knowledge and application of the virtues.”



To learn more about the “Virtue=Strength” program, visit: virtuestrength.com or use your phone’s camera to scan this QR code



Father Steven Weller, the school chaplain, said, "The program helps keep virtues in mind, the habits that really matter." Father Weller supports the efforts by welcoming teams to worship together during daily Masses at ACS. Senior athlete Morgan Reichl recalls one game day where the chapel was packed—shoulder to shoulder—with both the boys' and girls' basketball teams. "It's always a good feeling when the chapel is crowded, filled with teammates praising the Lord together," she shares. Morgan is one of two seniors who are tasked with the role of "virtue leader." "This added a new importance of the weekly virtue to me as I am now responsible for educating the rest of the team," she explains. "I feel more focused on remembering and demonstrating the virtue to my teammates throughout the week, as well as reminding them to do the same. Adding the aspect of virtues helps strengthen the team as well as each player."

VIRTUES NEEDED NOW MORE THAN EVER

Senior athlete Cade Statz agrees with Morgan that the virtues have been a beneficial part of the athletic program. He says that "going to a Catholic school has really shaped my athletic career into a sports career centered around God. Praying [as a team] before and after practice and after games has shown how God works through sports ... I loved it when we would have a home game for football and priests would pray after the game. We would pray with the other team, win or lose."

Varsity girls' basketball coach Ryan Klein shares, "The girls' basketball team has been heavily involved in Faith development for years, and the "Virtue=Strength" program has bolstered these efforts by providing specific weekly virtues that continuously challenge our coaches and players to improve."

"I have found that there is also great intercessory power in a group of intentionally prayerful people," Ryan continues. "Our prayers are more often than not directed toward very specific intentions, and the Lord has blessed many people through our prayers."

Program director Lou puts it this way: "By undertaking this program, you have nothing to lose and so much to gain ... Culture is getting so negatively aggressive in being anti-Catholic. We can't keep doing things the same way anymore."

Mr. Rayles is confident that virtue-training is the impetus for change: "We need virtue more than ever. We need virtuous leaders in our world. We need to have the virtues to get to heaven, which is ultimately what we should be preparing all our students for. Because everything we have here is fleeting."

"We need to understand the importance and significance that our role plays in the formation of our students ... the formation of their consciences, the formation of their souls and of knowing and loving and serving our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And if we fail to do that, then we fail." But ACS is not in the business of failing. By taking up this program, they are showing that they are working to prepare student-athletes not only for the athletic postseason but also and ultimately for the real postseason: Eternal Life with God in heaven. †



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