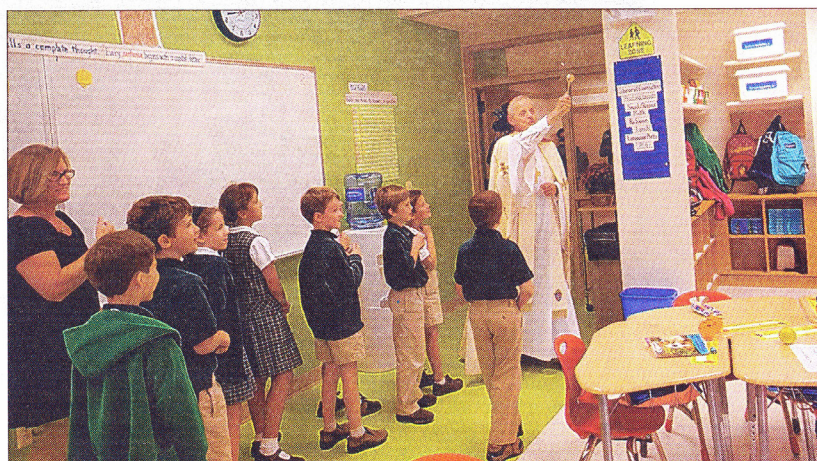


CATHOLIC SCHOOLS



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Cardinal Wuerl blesses a second grade classroom at the new St. Raphael School building in Rockville.

A dream came true

Cardinal Wuerl blesses new St. Raphael School building

By Maureen Boyle
Special to the Standard

The vision of the late Father G. William Finch was realized on Oct. 6 as hundreds of parishioners, school parents, administrators, faculty and students of St. Raphael School in Rockville gathered for the blessing and dedication of their new school building.

"This is the fulfillment of his dream. (Father Finch's) dream was accomplished," said Father James Meyers, pastor of St. Raphael Parish, in welcoming guests to the outdoor ceremony that included a prayer service led by Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl.

Father Finch, the former pastor of St. Raphael who died suddenly after celebrating Mass on Holy Thursday in 2009, began the project several years ago, but sadly never saw it to its final completion when students moved into their new building in May.

"Watching this building come to be parallels watching a child grow up quickly," said Cardinal Wuerl, recalling the structure's groundbreaking only 18 months ago when all the school students donned yellow hard hats and took part in the ceremony with him.

Most importantly, the cardinal said the building represents a place where the children of St. Raphael School will meet and learn about Jesus. "This building's intention is (about) carrying out that plan," he said. "So today, let us rejoice. It is a triumph for your parish and a great joy for the archdiocese."

As the cardinal made his way through the entire two-story school building, sprinkling each classroom and its occupants with holy water, he chatted with students, telling them, "You have a beautiful new school, and I came to ask God to bless all of you."

After the blessing, the students surprised their guests with a celebratory flash mob, running into the parish courtyard



St. Raphael students perform a "flash mob" song and dance routine to celebrate the dedication of their new school building.

from several directions, shaking green and white pompoms and singing, "We Go Together," from the musical "Grease."

Cardinal Wuerl told the audience it was the first time he'd been part of a flash mob. "I will add that to my list of firsts," he joked.

St. Raphael School opened its doors in 2006 after operating a thriving nursery school for 17 years, beginning with just 30 students in the kindergarten and first grade. Today, the school includes 145 students in kindergarten through sixth grade,

plus a 140-student pre-K. Over the next two years, a seventh and eighth grade will be added.

The building also includes extra office and multipurpose space for teachers and staff, a science lab, art and music rooms, and a new school library with a media center. The St. Raphael nursery school, kindergarten and first grade will stay in the original school building.

Father Meyers also expressed his gratitude to Dennis Delizzio, the architect for the new building and the Whiting-Turner

construction team. He also gave special thanks to the parishioners for their generous support of the project and the "pioneer parents" whom he said, "took a chance way back."

"It's a very emotional day from Father Bill starting it to Father Meyers completing it," said Teri Dwyer, principal of St. Raphael School. "We have great families behind everything we do."

Maura Downey, a sixth grade teacher, was beaming when she talked about the new building and classrooms. "It is a beautiful, wonderful building," she said. "I couldn't ask for a better place to work."

Throughout the \$9 million building, there are special touches designed to enhance the school's Catholic identity. Abstract crosses are inlaid into hallway floors before the entrance to each classroom. In every class, there is a crucifix, a statue of Mary, and a Bible. And above every water fountain is a poster of the archdiocesan seminarians studying for the priesthood, giving students an opportunity to pray for the Church's future priests.

"It's awesome. I love it," said Megan Whitt, a sixth grader, of the new school building. "Classes are small, so friends are like family. It's like a big family."

"This is so exciting. As a parent, it's not only about academics, but the goal is to have the Catholic faith taught, too," said Kathryn Schroder, whose three children attend St. Raphael School, adding she remembers when it was unclear if plans to complete the building would continue after Father Finch's passing. "It was truly dedicated parishioners, faculty and parents who allowed this dream to come true."

Near the school's entrance, adorning the wall is artwork and a photograph of the late pastor showing youngsters how to count the rings of a tree. Every day, as students and future generations of students enter St. Raphael School, they will walk past the words that will remind them of their legacy: "Father Bill planted this seed. We made it grow."