

OFF TO A 'BLESSED' START

Bishop Raica visits Prince of Peace Catholic School

By Jill Spero

Prince of Peace Catholic School (POP) hosted Bishop Steven J. Raica for his first visit to the school on Aug. 18. It was the first full week of school and the 450 students were thrilled to be back in the building, having quickly adapted to the new routines necessitated by COVID-19. The new outdoor learning spaces were especially a welcome focal point for the students. To have the bishop visit during this first week was an incredibly special event and everyone was grateful for his presence. Bishop Raica arrived for his visit at midday, after all the students had settled into their classrooms.

This year, the day starts with a temperature check during morning carpool and then it is “masks up” and into the disinfected building. The children are back to being students at POP, doing everything they did before the virus struck, just now in a medically-safe way, following the CDC guidelines.

Several students were waiting in the lobby to greet Bishop Raica with a gift bag of POP items as a token of thanks for his visit. Father John Fallon, pastor of Prince of Peach Church, along with Kelly Doss, parish operations manager and school president, and Jim Atkinson, facilities manager, accompanied the bishop and were joined by Connie Angstadt, principal; Bridget Carter, new assistant principal; and Vicki Jordan, guidance counselor, for a tour of the school buildings.

Atkinson led the tour, sharing his encyclopedic knowledge of the buildings and explaining how over the years the school has added new space and reconfigured existing areas to meet the needs of the growing school population. Both Atkinson and Angstadt have been with POP since the school's inception over twenty years ago. Their years of experience at the school were invaluable as the school created procedures, repurposed space and planned for reopening this fall.



Bishop Raica saw firsthand how the school has creatively expanded learning spaces by adding three outdoor “classrooms” complete with Wi-Fi. School families and the POP Knights of Columbus helped make the spaces by erecting large tents and adding tables and chairs under them. Students have at least one class per day outside in addition to outdoor physical ed classes and lunch. The number of physical ed classes has been increased to counteract any classroom fatigue that the students may be experiencing this year. This year, prepared hot lunches from Yellow Bicycle Catering are packaged into individual boxes so the students can enjoy lunch outside or in their classroom.

All students, as well as everyone on campus, are required to wear a mask to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The students take it very seriously and are committed to keeping one another healthy. The church and school staffs were tested days prior to the start of classes to make sure we were starting the year “COVID-clear.” When teachers arrive at school, they stop at the temperature kiosk, a new facial recognition/temperature measuring device created and donated by a school parent, to make sure they are fever-free. Before students enter the after-care program, which is segmented into small groups according to age, they are evaluated at the kiosk to make sure they are fever-free before entering the after-school program.

POP students peppered Bishop Raica with questions as he toured the classrooms and they keenly listened to his answers. He spent time with the students and met many of the teachers in their technology-filled classrooms. In one classroom, he used the Smartboard to point out exactly where he lived in Michigan before coming to Alabama. POP students enjoy learning with the latest technology. In fact, all students in grades two through eight are issued their

own Chromebook. This portable technology makes outdoor and remote learning very convenient.

There was more to the start of the school year than the classroom and movement modifications and vigilant disinfection. The teaching staff needed to be prepared for the emotional side of school reentry that students would be experiencing after many months of absence. In addition, since students would be less mobile in the classroom, teachers needed to retool their classroom management strategies and practices. Dr. Dale Wisely, POP's director of family life and retired child psychologist, held a seminar for teachers and staff to heighten their awareness of the emotional struggles students may be facing because of COVID-19. The teachers also took advantage of online professional development in these areas.

As Bishop Raica's tour of our campus came to an end, he passed a preschool classroom. Unexpectedly, the door flew wide open and the children excitedly waved to the bishop and he waved right back to them. The entire school was happy that Bishop Raica came to visit Prince of Peace and look forward to seeing him again, soon.

Prince of Peace welcomes applications throughout the year for pre-K3 through grade eight students. Tours of the school are available every week on “Welcome Wednesdays” after the 8:10 a.m. school Mass and on other days by appointment. Contact Principal Connie Angstadt at cangstadt@popcatholic.org or 205-824-7886. Visit www.popcatholic.net for more details.



(Above) Bishop Steven Raica greets preschool children during his tour of the Prince of Peace Catholic School campus, Aug. 18.

(Left) Prince of Peace Catholic School students hand Bishop Raica welcome gifts as he arrives for his tour, Aug. 18. (Photos courtesy of Jill Spero)