



**PEP  
TALKS**  
FOR

# **Catholic teachers**

ENCOURAGEMENT,  
SUPPORT,  
GUIDANCE

**CAROLE EIPERS, D.MIN.**



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## Introduction

Some days everything in our lives runs on track. Our responsibilities and relationships are in sync and effortless. Other days, everything seems to fall apart. We end up discouraged and demoralized. Those times call for words of encouragement and support. They call for a spiritual pep talk.

Are there times you feel like that as a Catholic educator? One day, everything is going smoothly, effortlessly, and with a feeling of accomplishment. The next day, you find yourself questioning, discouraged, overwhelmed, or worried.

Jesus says to each of us, “Come to me you who labor and are weary..” (Matthew 11:28). On our dark days, our frustrating days, Jesus welcomes us, in all our tiredness and hesitations. On those days we depend on each other, we support each other, we encourage each other, and we point out to each other all the good that we might sometimes miss.

During your prayerful moments, amid the discouraging times, may these reflections of guidance, insight, and vision remind you who you are, whose you are, and the sacred ministry to which you are called.

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## Is this a vocation? Sometimes it really doesn't seem like it.

Some days, from the time the students arrive until they leave, there is nothing that seems vocation-like in our work. Ordination, religious life, marriage—clearly those are calls from God. But this? The class is restless—maybe it's the first warm day, or the day before vacation, or it's just Tuesday! Your patience is tested as one student announces he didn't do his homework; it is tested further when another student asks to use the lavatory, and that request becomes an epidemic. You try group work, which usually engages them. Not today! The groups grumble, and you explain their task six different ways, but they can't grasp it. A fire drill and an unexpected visit from the pastor—and it's not even noon!

Vocation is from the Latin *vocātiō*, which means “a call, summons.” A vocation is God's call to serve: in your case, the call to serve as a teacher. What happens on any given day—the humdrum, the frustrating, the amazing—you are living your vocation; you are responding to God's call.

Mother Teresa once reminded people that we are not called to be successful but to be faithful. Your presence and love for the children, your ability to weather the rough days—that is faithfulness. Every day there are lessons to be learned, important ones, about faith in the routine of life.

**TO DO** » The Lord whispers again each day, “Come follow me!” Today, reflect on being faithful, and say yes to the Lord again.

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**TO PRAY** » *Lord, you love me and you have called me to teach your children. Help me to say yes every day!*

# I really don't want to prejudge any of these kids, but...

The Latin term *tabula rasa* means “scraped slate” or blank slate. We know that no child is a blank slate in terms of their minds. But there is another kind of blank slate that can be a gift to those who are granted it. This blank slate is a new beginning, a fresh start.

Sometimes a child is judged by what happened last year, or a permanent record file, or an older sibling's performance. Such prejudging means the slate is filled with expectations—good or bad—of what this child will be or do in your classroom.

Anyone may welcome a slate that proclaims our positive qualities and accomplishments, but it is never easy to be determined by past failures. It is never easy to be compared to another person, whether that means we are expected to measure up to great achievements or are presumed to be the same sort of “loser” as another person.

Jesus always offers people a fresh start. No matter what we did yesterday or last year, Jesus invites us to begin anew. He invites us to offer to his children what he offers us. Embrace his offer and enjoy the graces of a new day. Then, put away the files and memories of students' siblings, and offer each child a new chance.

**TO DO** » Look at your class list, think about each child, and consider any unfair or prejudicial expectations you have. Let go of those expectations and prepare to be surprised by the good things each child will do.

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**TO PRAY** » *Holy Spirit, inspire me to look at each child as unique and to grant each of them a new beginning today.*

# Sometimes, parents seem to be the problem!

Whenever we're discussing the challenges Catholic school teachers face, someone will say, "The parents!" It is easy to place blame, of course, and maybe they do fail now and then at good parenting.

All parents have gifts and shortcomings. Can we put ourselves in the shoes of the parents we find difficult? I learned an important lesson when I criticized a parent for not cooperating and then heard that her husband had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Has the family you find hard to deal with been experiencing illness? A job loss? A separation? I have been a less-than-perfect parent when those things struck my family. We can be a source of strength for families facing tragedy or who are struggling when we offer compassion instead of judgment. We can be good news to them, just as Jesus was to those who suffered.

A second lesson I learned about parents was from a wise mentor-teacher. I complained that the parents of a particular student showed no interest in the religion text's parent pages. Family projects to reinforce lessons were left undone—or were clearly done by the child alone. "What can I accomplish," I bemoaned, "if the parents aren't involved?"

"Ah," the wise mentor responded, "those are the children who need us most!"

**TO DO »** Put those "parent shoes" on and reach out; identify the children who may need you most! God's grace will always guide you.

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**TO PRAY »** *God our Father, you understand the joys and challenges of parents. Bless the parents of my students, and help me to support them.*

# I'm swamped with paperwork!

**M**y teaching colleague, working on a report about our school, lamented, “I didn’t become a teacher to do paperwork!” I am guessing most of us would say the same. Although necessary, the paperwork can pile up. It can seem overwhelming and even appear as a distraction from student learning.

Technology has helped some teachers. Others still struggle with paper and pen, perhaps. No matter the mode, the paperwork can seem daunting and, in some cases, pointless.

Yet we are required to submit all manner of documents. How can we do it in ways that keep our eyes on the goal of learning and might even bring us joy?

First, don’t let it pile up. Tackle it when it comes. That can diminish our sense of being overwhelmed. Second, remember the purpose of each paper-task. Diocesan surveys may result in advocacy or financial support; parish council reports or website articles can bolster parishioners’ sense of ownership of the school. Parent-teacher conference notes can help us focus and be sure we don’t omit whatever good news we can share with parents.

The purpose of our lesson plans is obvious; because their immediate connection to the goal of learning is evident, we may find these plans less burdensome. Comments on student work are key to learning—offering affirmation and pointing to growth.

**TO DO »** Recall how each piece of paperwork serves a larger purpose. Give thanks to God as you complete each one.

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**TO PRAY »** *Jesus, grant me patience with paperwork, and help me to recognize its value and purpose.*

# I don't think I'm reaching some of the students.

Whatever grade you teach, you may have a student that you feel you never quite reach. You notice the child's constant distracted look or inattentiveness as you present a concept. You get frustrated by the child's failure to ever follow directions.

You have tried and are trying to unlock the mind and touch the heart of such a student, of course. What sparks this child? Is there a sport they love, or a particular interest in current events? How might you engage that “igniter” creatively—using sports statistics in math, for example, or news stories in language arts? How about applying gospel lessons to playground games or using video games to design a religion game?

Maybe the “untouchable” students are particular gifts to you. Is the gift they bring a call to the virtue of patience? Is the gift a reminder that nothing worthwhile comes easily?

When you face the challenge of a student you don't seem to be able to reach, remember it may be your role in this student's life to prepare the soil. Someone else may reach the student because you were there first. Perhaps you reached the student by your understanding. Never forget that *seeming* not to touch them doesn't mean you *didn't* touch them in some way. God alone knows the successes, and God loves you because you try to reach each of his children.

**TO DO »** Reflect on the “untouchables” in your class. Think about who they may become. Thank God for the role you are playing in their lives.

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**TO PRAY »** *Dear Lord, when I get discouraged, strengthen me and remind me that I play an important role in every student's life.*