

EPIPHANY SCHOOL: The Western Rural Frontier

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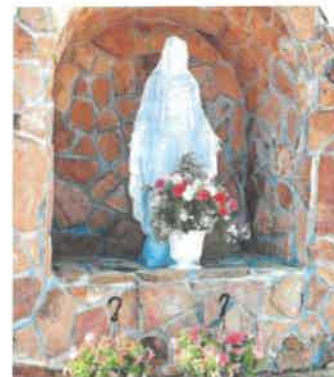
Nestled in the northwest side of the diocese amidst the serene backdrop of rural Florida. Epiphany School is a beacon of educational excellence and faith. Serving six counties – Suwannee, Lafayette, Baker, Union, Columbia and Gilchrist – Epiphany stands as the western rural frontier for Catholic education in the Diocese of St. Augustine.

For the past eight years, Epiphany's mission has focused on accessibility. Buses transport children daily from San Juan Mission in Branford and St. Francis Xavier Parish in Live Oak to Epiphany School, then to St. Francis Catholic Academy in Gainesville for high school. This Rural Education Initiative of the Catholic Foundation ensures that children from the western frontier receive a comprehensive Catholic education from kindergarten through high school.

In the 2023-24 school year, 36 elementary and nine high school students relied on this vital service. Two generous Catholic Foundation benefactors, moved by Epiphany's mission, donated

two 25-passenger buses without ever seeing the school. Later, an 11-passenger van was donated, and this summer, the school is receiving a new full-size bus seating 48-72 students.

Out of last year's enrollment of 125 students, over 50 percent were not Catholic. Yet, Epiphany's reputation for excellence and moral grounding attracted many families. On January 11, 2024, Father Bob Hoffman, pastor of Epiphany, consecrated the school to the Pierced Hearts of Jesus and Mary. This past Easter, Epiphany's Christ-centered environment led to the baptism and confirmation of five individuals – three children and two adults. Father



Bob noted, "This happens year after year. The school is a catalyst for evangelization in a predominantly Protestant territory."

Epiphany offers a variety of extracurricular activities, including co-ed soccer and archery, but its true essence lies in its deeply ingrained Catholic identity. Faith formation at Epiphany is immersive. Eucharistic adoration sessions in the parish church allow children to find solitude with Jesus. The parish's new outdoor bronze Stations of the Cross connect students with their faith during Lent as they reflect on the

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Some students commute to Epiphany from Branford and Live Oak thanks to generous donors.



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Father Robert Hoffman prepares for Mass with student altar servers.

Passion of Christ amidst nature. Spiritual life at Epiphany is vibrant. Students participate in First Friday Mass and Sacred Heart devotion and have access to the sacrament of reconciliation throughout the day. A Marian grotto outside the parish hall invites students to pause for a Hail Mary, while a St. Francis of Assisi statue provides a serene spot for reflection.

Epiphany's curriculum integrates the lives of the saints and Catholic teachings into daily lessons. Carmelite Sisters Freeda Aloysius, Juanina Maria de Fatima Lafu and Hendrika Yuvinta Boro Longo, teach religious education and assist in classrooms. Middle school students read works by J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, while eighth graders explore St. Thomas Aquinas' *Five Ways* in their language arts studies.

Former students often return, amazed at their alma

mater's growth. Epiphany's commitment to excellence is evident in its STREAM (Science, Technology, Religion, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) lab, which is becoming accredited. The school recently introduced a Suzuki violin program led by professional musician Kelsey LaCour, who also developed the school choir. Joe Antonacci, a University of Florida student, provides organ lessons, enriching Epiphany's musical culture.

Founded in 1959, Epiphany boasts a proud history of graduates who have achieved great things. One student, Joanna P., thrived at Epiphany, honing her artistic skills and forming lasting friendships despite being the only girl in her grade her first year.

Uniforms at Epiphany foster a sense of equality and community among students from various socioeconomic



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Soccer is one of two sports that are co-ed at Epiphany School.

backgrounds. State scholarships often cover tuition, ensuring no out-of-pocket costs for families. While tuition does not cover all expenses, generous benefactors and parish funding fill the gap, making Catholic education accessible to all children.

Epiphany's 65-year-old building has been maintained and updated with new windows and a grant-funded playground.

The grounds strengthen the bond between the parish and the school, hosting parish picnics and playground activities after Mass. Father Bob recently purchased a large grill to bring the community together, enhancing the flexibility of events on parish or school grounds.

In Principal Rita Klenk's office, a verse from Matthew 17:20 reminds everyone that faith, even as small as a mustard seed, can move mountains. Father Bob encapsulates Epiphany's spirit, saying, "Our greatest hope for the students at Epiphany Catholic School is that we are planting the seeds of hope."

Epiphany is more than an educational institution; it is a nurturing community where faith, education and community unite to create a brighter future. Here, smallness is no barrier to greatness, and every child is encouraged to reach their full potential. 🐦



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