



### ***Introduction to the Classical Tradition at Saint Rita***

The mission of Saint Rita Catholic School is, always has been, and always will be to bring our students and their families to Christ. All thirty-seven elementary schools in this Diocese share this same goal, which we all pursue in a unique way tailored to the needs, styles, and aspirations of our communities. This rich diversity strengthens our sisterhood of Catholic schools, and we are blessed to be part of such a dynamic and faithful Diocese.

Living out and passing on the Faith is the telos of our schools, and the rhythm of prayer, worship, the reception of the sacraments, and the participation in the liturgical life of the Church shapes our days and weeks at school. In our classrooms, our teachers structure their lessons and units to develop the skills, outlined in the Diocesan curriculum, that will enable our students to know and defend their Faith, most importantly, but also to read, write, listen, think, speak, problem-solve, and create. Armed with these skills, our graduates will be better able to deflect the attacks and confusion of the culture and hold fast to the Truth, not just for themselves but to build up the Kingdom of God.

The Diocesan curriculum in most subjects emphasizes the development and refinement of skills - i.e. reading comprehension, picking out main ideas, writing topic sentences, drawing with one or two-point perspective, conjugating verbs, reading music, formulating a hypothesis. In these areas, the schools and the teachers choose the content they hope will interest and inspire their students as they build and sharpen the specified skills. At Saint Rita, we intentionally select the content of the 2000 year old Christian tradition as the source material for our classes in the humanities and the arts. In organizing that content most cohesively and memorably for our students, we arrange the Diocesan Social Studies curriculum into one big timeline, broken into four periods: the Ancient World, the Middle Ages, the Early Modern, and Late Modern periods. Each grade studies a time period (in two cycles) and this provides an organizing principle through which to study history, literature, writing, art, and music, as well as place scientific and technological development in historical context. The time period approach is discussed in greater detail below.

In addition to content knowledge and skills, a Saint Rita education in the classical tradition instills a particular sort of attitude or mindset – one of wonder and appreciation for God’s creation, a desire for goodness, truth, and beauty, and a sense of how to live a virtuous life. For seventy years we have taken this approach, which is ultimately oriented toward inviting our students into a deeper relationship with Christ. This philosophy, based on our understanding of the unique dignity of the human person and his relationship to his Creator and all creation, underscores our motto that “the soul of education is the education of a soul.”

### ***Founded on Faith***

Since the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill, PA, first opened our doors seventy years ago, in 1952, the Faith has infused all that we do. Our day is

punctuated with prayer and the singing of hymns. Our walls are decorated with sacred art and images of the saints. Our week revolves around the celebration of the Mass and time spent in Eucharistic Adoration and Confession. Our year highlights the liturgical seasons and traditions through which we live out our Faith. We take a holistic approach to forming our students intellectually and spiritually, building their character and encouraging them to become the saints God made them to be. In this, we aim higher than our secular counterparts outside the Faith. For us education is not just about memorizing a set of facts to be regurgitated on a multiple-choice test, it should not be fragmented and randomly conveyed, and it is not best delivered via computers or other devices. Rather, learning should be integrated, holistic, personal, and aimed at knowing, understanding, and expressing Truth. This has never been more threatened - or more needed - than it is today, in a culture that is profoundly confused and alarmingly hostile.

### ***The Classical Tradition***

In recent years, particularly as many public schools head off in increasingly disturbing directions, we have seen in our communities a call to return to our roots, to traditional morality, and to a more cohesive approach to education grounded in a real understanding of the human person. Our Catholic schools are uniquely well positioned to respond to this call, and they can respond in different ways. This section outlines in more detail the approach that Saint Rita has taken, with further explanation of our classical tradition. In this and in all that we do, we seek to serve the needs of our parish. Our student body is 80-85% parishioners, and for all of our students and families we strive to provide the best education possible, an education that is inspirational and transformational as well as accessible and affordable for all who want to join us.

## History

As outlined in the introduction, the approach we take at Saint Rita is a historical one, built on a timeline of Salvation History, where we can see God's revelation of Himself to Man play out over time, and pivoting around the central event in human history - the Incarnation of Christ. We divide this story into four time periods studied by each grade, and students pass through two cycles of these periods during their time here. In first through fourth grade, our students are introduced to the peoples, the cultures, the stories, the themes, and the big questions of the Ancient World, the Medieval Period, the Early Modern, and finally the Modern Era. Then in grades five through eight, our older students cycle back through the four periods, this time at a higher level of study: reading, studying, debating, and grappling with the causes, effects, and meaning of historical events. Our older students can also begin to see how God raises up saints at different times and places in history to continue His work of salvation, something that resonates with our young people in a particular way as they prepare for their own Confirmation.

Organizing our content into historical timelines helps emphasize the divine purpose to History, and to try to grasp that is the point of learning about long-dead people and civilizations, in order to better understand our own times and our future direction. It also allows us to tell history in a natural and age-old way, as an unfolding and very compelling story that sticks in our children's memories, and can then help them glue together historical developments in Church history, in science and technology, and in literature and the Arts. All of these subjects can be integrated into this historical narrative in a holistic and comprehensible way. Finally - not to be overlooked - this historical focus is FUN! Here's a glimpse of some of what our students get to do in their time periods:

**Ancient World:** Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome are introduced in first grade – yes, our first graders can follow *The Odyssey*! Fifth grade revisits this time period, getting to read and discuss *Antigone* and *The Aeneid*, and even participating in a recreated ancient Olympic Games! Chariot races on the blacktop!

**Medieval:** The Middle Ages are introduced in second grade – what eight year old would not enjoy reading *Robin Hood* and shooting bows and arrows? Sword fights in PE! Sixth graders cycle back through – debating heresies and field tripping to local monasteries!

**Early Modern:** In the wake of the Renaissance and Reformation, the age of exploration and the colonization of the new world take center stage in third grade and then again in seventh grade. The American Revolution and legacy of the Founding Fathers are highlighted.

**Modern:** Our fourth and eighth graders study the period from the American Civil War to the present, and can dazzle our Open House attendees with a recitation of *The Gettysburg Address*, go see Ford's Theater or traipse around a Civil War battlefields, create radio broadcasts from the front lines of a world war, or re-enact treaty negotiations as the League of Nations.

Because our students cycle through these time periods twice, it creates built-in partner grades where the older and younger students studying the same time period can work together on projects, help each other memorize historical pieces, or even take field trips together to museums and other historical sites. Similar to how many schools buddy up the sacramental classes of 2nd and 8th graders, this partnership facilitates leadership, deepens friendships, and tightens our community.

### *Humanities*

In the schedule of our day, we structure our time to facilitate a greater integration of the language arts curriculum into our historical periods. We call this integrated time *Humanities*, and it is typically taught by the same teacher. In this way, the teacher can work on all of the language arts skills outlined in the Diocesan curriculum - from reading comprehension and picking out main ideas to writing topic sentences and developing editing skills - using content related to the class' historical focus. Students' reading skills improve as they enjoy, dissect, and discuss the great literature of the time period they are studying (or stories set in that time and place, or imbued with the same themes - as age appropriate). They hone their writing skills in narratives, poems, and essays inspired by the historical people and events they are studying, the questions that they wrestled with, and how those events or debates impact life today.

### *Skills & Content*

It is not only the language arts curriculum that gets tied into the historical periods. Ideally, all subjects are integrated so that learning flows naturally from classroom to classroom, through all of our teachers, to all of our students. Students develop the skills outlined in the Diocesan curriculum for Art (perspective, shading, etc) and Music (reading music, identifying rhythmic patterns, etc) by focusing on the art and music of the historical period. The benefit beyond the historical integration is that students are introduced to the artistic masterpieces of the Christian tradition, seeing the beauty in those creations and learning more about their religious inspiration. Our children hear and sing the music of the Church over time and appreciate the beauty of its art. We strive to help our students see these connections in all academic disciplines - and in Church history and the lives of the saints as well.

## *Math & Science*

Although the Diocesan math and science curriculum is not as readily integrated into our historical time periods, we do teach it from a particular philosophical perspective. Just as we help our students see how God reveals Himself through history, we also help them discover more about the Creator by observing, investigating, and experimenting with His creation. Certainly studying science and mathematics helps our students think clearly, work sequentially, and problem solve effectively, but perhaps even more importantly the logic, order, and beauty of these disciplines reflect something profound in the Divine Nature. Grasping at that lays a foundation of appreciation for the created world and a motivation for authentic stewardship, that our Catholic schools are uniquely positioned to provide.

## *Texts & Resources*

Related to this discussion of the integrated curriculum is the question of which books and resources lend themselves best to this sort of study. Whenever possible, we introduce our students to primary sources and work from the text to build comprehension and analytical skills. This could look like a class of middle schoolers sitting down to dissect the *Declaration of Independence* in a Socratic seminar, but it also could be a group of primary students looking at a Rembrandt painting, memorizing an Emily Dickinson poem, explaining a point from the Catechism, acting out a scene from *As You Like It*, or listening to and singing the music of our national anthem. We use textbooks and other curriculum supplements that align with our values and support student learning, but our students find learning most exciting when they get to work with primary sources.

Our classrooms are full of questioning and discussing, reading and writing, reciting and presenting, play acting and experimenting. They are not full of computers. We do have a recently upgraded computer lab and two class sets of chromebooks available for students to hone their typing, editing, and researching skills, as age appropriate, but we have made an intentional choice to minimize screen time at school, especially for our youngest students. We want our students, who have been swiping at screens since infancy, to be surrounded at school with human interaction, in a way that fosters relationships, virtue, and empathy as well as clear communication and effective collaboration skills.

### *Language*

For years, Saint Rita students have studied Latin, a feature of most classical schools that is also taught in some of our sister schools in this Diocese. We find the study of this language particularly conducive to the study and mastery of English grammar and vocabulary, and that it prepares our students well to learn other languages who share these roots, if they so choose. A familiarity with Latin also facilitates the study of Western history and deepens comprehension of the prayers of the liturgy.

### *Pedagogy*

Much of this section has focused on the content of a classical education, as lived out here at Saint Rita, but there is also a distinctive pedagogy we strive to employ. A model lesson plan in the classical tradition would be a socratic seminar based on a primary source text. We believe the best teachers are questioners, and that learning becomes most meaningful and lasting when drawn out of the learner rather than dictated by the teacher. This style of teaching is challenging but rewarding, and ideally suited to forming the thinking, analyzing, and expressing (written, oral, and other) skills of our students.



Students need baseline knowledge from which to develop these skills, of course, and their capacity to hone them deepens over time. Thus the students proceed through the various aspects of the *trivium* as their age and ability dictate. Memorization, analysis, and expression come with the grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages of the trivium. Memorization comes naturally to young children (whether initiated by a teacher introducing math facts, or by the learner's interest in the statistics on the back of baseball cards!). Emerging adolescents seek to understand, and often utilize argument to do it - such is the intentional focus of the logic stage. At all stages, students are capable of an age-appropriate expression of an idea, a concept, or a truth, but that is especially apparent the older they get when more focus is placed on clear, logical, beautiful, and persuasive expression, as in the rhetoric stage.

### ***The Path Ahead***

Since the COVID pandemic and its collateral effects have waned these past couple of years, thanks be to God, we at Saint Rita have loved exploring the classical tradition and are excited to continue doing so in the coming years. In the context of a severe teacher shortage, this unique attribute has been a draw for new teachers who are excited to learn more about the classical tradition, and an appreciation for this approach has motivated many school families to come to us or remain with us over the years. Many of our school parents report learning things from their children over the dinner table that they never learned in school, and they share that this classical education has become an adventure for the whole family. The philosophy animating the classical tradition resonates particularly well with the spirituality of our parish community, which has always had a more conservative and traditional style as compared to some of our sister parishes.

Challenges and opportunities abound for every school, and like all of them we strive always to become the best version of ourselves. The richness of the classical approach adds a dimension to the education we are able to offer that benefits our students, resonates with our community, and contributes to human flourishing on our little campus. We are grateful for the support of the Diocese of Arlington to grow together in this endeavor.