

Standing Ovation: St. Mary Catholic School Teacher Maureen Tepen Honored With St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Award

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BRUSSELS - She received a standing ovation. Her family, including her husband, siblings, and children made sure they were there to see it. Every student gave her a hug. That was the scene at St. Mary Catholic School in Brussels after Maureen Tepen, the third/fourth-grade teacher and fifth/sixth-grade language arts teacher in the small, rural school, was announced as the winner of the 2022 St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Award in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois during a surprise celebration and award presentation at the school May 4. Bishop Thomas John Paprocki presented Tepen with the award.

“God is so good, God is so good,” Tepen said, as she fought back tears from the podium during the event. “I decided to be a teacher when I was in first grade, and I had this little seed in my heart that I wanted to teach kids, and to have a spot they knew they could come to be encouraged and grow.”

Then, looking at all the students in the room, Tepen said, “I just love every single one of you students. You have done so much for me. You helped me to grow, and every day I get to see growth in you. You say that I help you become the best version of yourself, but it’s you guys that help me be the best version of myself. God has given each of you so many talents. I want you to find that talent and live it in your life. Keep God first and foremost in your heart and mind.”

The St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Award recognizes one Catholic teacher who is making a big difference in the classroom, who authentically lives out what it means to be Catholic and instills the Catholic faith into her students, and who embodies St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, who founded Catholic schools in the United States.

Tepen has taught for 27 years in Catholic education, including 21 years at St. Mary in Brussels, five at St. Francis Xavier in Jerseyville, and one at St. John in Carrollton.

The Office for Catholic Schools and Office for Communications for the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, organizers of the award, received a record number of nominations — 72 teachers in all — from principals, teachers, parents, priests, previous students, and current students this year. A team consisting of former educators in the diocese poured through the nominations and read all the stories of impact about each teacher, narrowing the list to five finalists. In the end, Tepen rose to the top.

A common theme throughout the nominations for Tepen, who belongs to St. Joseph Church in Meppen, part of Blessed Trinity Parish, is she is “Christ-like” and inspires her students to become the “best versions” of themselves.

“Mrs. Tepen is a loving person, and one time when I did not know how to do my work, and I was getting mad, she came over and said everything would be OK,” said Riley Pohlman, a current student of Tepen. “She spent a long time helping me, and I finally got it. She was so patient and calm the whole time. I was happy that she took the time to help me. At church, she reads, sings, and she goes to church every single weekend, and she does it all for Christ.”

“Mrs. Tepen treats everyone like her own family and is someone you should go to if you’re having a rough day,” said Dayton Brundies, a previous student of Tepen. “She is very selfless and loves donating to the less fortunate. Mrs. Tepen is truly a saint and is dedicated to her religion. She has inspired me to take my religion more seriously.”

“Her knowledge of the Bible and the Catholic faith is infinite,” said Rachel Wilschetz-Hartman, a colleague of Tepen. “Her dedication to God and her faith is exemplary. Her love for God is witnessed at Mass, in school, and with her family. She volunteers for all the extra activities, is in charge of our missions collections, and she handmakes collection boxes and successfully encourages students to donate money for the less fortunate. I am appreciative of her patience, uplifting advice, and support throughout the years. She has influenced me to examine my relationship with God and deepen my faith.”

“The genuine love Mrs. Tepen has for being a teacher shines through in the heart-felt projects she incorporates into her lessons, like the Christmas angels, self-portraits, and

Mother's Day yarn flowers," said Becky Lorts, principal at St. Mary School. "She infuses faith-filled activities throughout all subjects she teaches. Her classroom is warm and nurturing. She inspires others to grow in their faith and spirituality. She is an excellent role model to others, not only in words but actions. She is a witness through her faithful participation in the sacraments. As her administrator, I look to her when I need guidance and even reassurance if I'm having a difficult day because she is the epitome of kindness. St. Mary School is very blessed to have her as a veteran teacher, and I am so blessed to call her my friend."

There are 43 Catholic schools in the diocese (36 elementary, seven high schools). Stay tuned in early 2023 as *Catholic Times* will announce how to submit a teacher for the 2023 St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Award.

