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A temporary home: Holy Spirit School flooding sends students to Cardinal Muench Seminary

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It was 5:45 a.m. when my wife Lynn answered the telephone July 19. She said it was Msgr. Jeffrey Wald and that I needed to get to school right away, the school was flooding.

I didn't know what to think as I ran out of the house at 6 a.m. While driving and eating breakfast, my mind started to wander. Is this really happening? How can a school above ground level flood?

Silence then came over me and I said a quick prayer thanking the Lord for all the blessings in my life and asking him for his guidance as this journey begins. It was a quiet and peaceful drive the next five minutes.

As I drove into the parking lot there were already a few cars there. I parked and started walking up to the school building and I could see this would be a big challenge as water was slowly running out the door. While walking down the hallway I was greeted with about an inch of sewer water that covered the main entrance, main office, faculty lounge and workroom, six classrooms, most of the gym and most of the main hallways.

I immediately started taking pictures and documenting everything that could potentially be lost. By the end of the day, the custodian and I had sucked up so much water and picked up so many soaked items that we were exhausted.

Thank you so much to the Holy Spirit Knights of Columbus and parishioners who were there that day for the initial cleanup of sewer water. I am eternally grateful! Also, that day and over the next few days, more and more people showed up and helped wherever possible. Thank you to those people and your servant spirit; I am also eternally grateful!

After a few days of cleanup were over during the hot and humid week of July 19 and as Catholic Mutual Insurance was starting to get more involved, the thought started to run through people's minds: Are we going to be able to put things back together in time for school to start?

The answer became apparent as the restoration company started to notice asbestos tile underneath the carpet and that water had started to soak up a lot of sheetrock and wood in the areas that were affected.

All I remember one day, sitting in Msgr. Wald's makeshift office in his former sitting area in the rectory, is he mentioned, "I wonder if we could use Cardinal Muench?"

He immediately picked up the phone and called Earl Wilhelm to ask Bishop Samuel Aquila if we could use the seminary. That very night, Bishop Aquila called Msgr. Wald and granted him permission. I was so excited to hear the news the next day as I knew the seminary would be a great place to be. The whole school could be together. This was truly a blessing.

Imagine trying to move a whole school in two and a half weeks and holding interviews for three out of the eight classroom teachers and four shared teachers at Holy Spirit. I'm not saying this to make anybody feel sorry for me, but to reveal the passion, dedication and work ethic the rest of the staff have for Holy Spirit School and Catholic education. There was just a handful of staff on any given day that made this move possible. It is because of them that this school year will be successful!

I would like to thank Bishop Samuel Aquila for his blessing to use Cardinal Muench Seminary, Scott Hoselton and Earl Wilhelm from the Diocese of Fargo for all of their help to make this relocation work, Msgr. Jeffrey Wald for his passion and dedication to Catholic education, Superintendent Deacon David Haney for his leadership and direction, the staff at Holy Spirit School for their unwavering support and dedication to the school, Patty Neuharth and Sherri Simon for their strength to get things done, the staff at Holy Spirit Parish for their flexibility and help, and my wife, Lynn, for her love and support during this time.

In closing, it is Aug. 22 and the move is almost complete. There are only a few little things to tie up and get organized. We are looking forward to the opening school Mass in the Cardinal Muench chapel on Friday, Aug. 26, at 8:30 a.m. Thank you everyone for your continued thoughts and prayers.

I am happy that Cardinal Muench is again looking down and smiling, seeing the seminary active again. Who knows how many vocations to the priesthood or religious life will come out of this year? Have faith and God bless!

Jason Kotrba is principal of Holy Spirit Elementary School in Fargo.