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Sister Mary Grace of the Sisters of Life in New York gives a keynote address April 9, the final day of the National Education Association Convention at the Minneapolis Convention Center. (OSV News/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

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One teacher standing in the front of a classroom with the knowledge of Christ can bring more "hope and joy into this world than the most dynamic and savvy influencers," Sr. Mary Grace told educators April 9.

The Sister of Life made the comments in her keynote at the National Catholic Educational Association's annual convention in Minneapolis.

"The children need you; they need your presence," Sister Mary Grace told the 3,800 educators on the final day of the April 7-9 convention. "They need your attentiveness, your goodness, your faith."

Sister Mary Grace recalled a teacher she knew who got down on one knee each day and attentively listened to a young student named Zoey talk about a slug she saw every day before class.

"For months, Zoey only had a slug story to tell," Sister Mary Grace said. The teacher bent down each time and listened to Zoey.

"It wasn't until about a year (later) that Zoey came in and said something totally different, and it wasn't about the slug," Sister Mary Grace said. "(Zoey) was now ready to trust her teacher with big news. Zoey was being abused, and she was trying to find a person in her life that she could trust. … After the family home, the classroom is the most formative influence in our lives by far."

Sister Mary Grace said people are hardwired to find meaning in every moment because "deep down, we know that we matter."

Teachers Susan Stanke, Eileen McGurran and Dave Gottwalt of St. Rose of Lima Catholic Scho

Teachers Susan Stanke, Eileen McGurran and Dave Gottwalt of St. Rose of Lima Catholic School in Roseville, Minn., pray during the closing Mass of the 2026 National Catholic Education Association Convention April 9 at the Minneapolis Convention Center in downtown Minneapolis. (OSV News photo/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

Meaning cannot be manufactured, Sister Mary Grace said, and "God provides even before we can perceive our needs."

"I think that the issue of our times isn't so much about doing less or more in our workplaces, but that we've attempted to live a subtle agreement to the lie that we're worthless, that we don't really matter, that there isn't really more, that this is as good as it gets. … The opposite of hope isn't despair; it's cynicism. … The dark chapter does not have the right to conclude our stories."

Catholic educators, she said, can offer children a safe place and an encounter with divine love first received in the educators' hearts, "giving (the children) the love that they would otherwise be deprived (of)."

"I don't think there's ever been more of a need for real teachers, teachers (who) believe, teachers (who) … not only teach but testify to the life of Jesus Christ and the real difference he makes," Sister Mary Grace said. "Far greater than the efforts of the finest human progress, incomparable to the proclaimed fleets of (artificial intelligence) that are helping us, every single child, every single human heart, needs another person.

"They need a real person of the world, just like you, in their real world, in their normal life, showing up day after day, who refuse to give up on the goodness in them."

Mary Carlson, a middle school science teacher at St. Joseph in West St. Paul, said the three-day conference helped her realize that being a teacher is a calling more than a career, one that "restores and gives life."

"God wants to love the world," Carlson told The Catholic Spirit, the news outlet of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. "Not only was it super inspiring that we're teaching heart-to-heart (relationships) but then (also) increasing our skills. At the end of the day, what it is, is an encounter (with Christ)."

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Carlson said she felt energized about Catholic education, not just for today or tomorrow, but "as it goes on for weeks, years, just that we have been given this great gift of being able to educate in the whole truth of the whole child." Her experience at the convention was a "beautiful and authentic witness of life with Christ" as a Catholic school teacher.

"It's a unique path, and God blesses it abundantly," she said. "What does it look like to live more vitally? Like at St. Joe's, we have so much joy. And what I feel at this conference is an invitation to live more deeply."

Brian Shriver, a teacher at St. Ambrose in Woodbury, said the conference was a perfect blend of education and the Catholic faith. Particularly, Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston in his keynote address April 7 and Sister Mary Grace provided useful tips and guidelines that Shriver hopes to use in his classroom.

"You may not see the impact of your work … but God sees it, and he sees every act of love," Sister Mary Grace said. "Nothing is unseen and nothing is unemptied. What do our schools need now? We need teachers like you, teachers (who) are willing to take days (at the conference) to be formed."