

Smith Preparatory Academy

Gala Introduction – March 28, 2026

Headmaster Michael Phillips

Good evening, friends, and welcome.

Thank you for being here tonight. Thank you for your presence, your interest, and your willingness to stand with Smith Preparatory Academy as we look toward the future. As my friend Martin Cothran has said, “Together we are saving western Civilization one student at a time.”

Smith Prep offers what we call a *truly* classical Christian education. Many people rightly recognize that a classical education is demanding and academically rigorous. Some are familiar with the trivium—grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric—and see in it a time-tested structure for learning. But those descriptions, while true, do not quite reach the heart of what we are doing.

Because classical Christian education is not first about *methods*.
It is about *formation*.

At Smith Preparatory Academy, education is the shaping of a human soul. It is the careful cultivation of a student’s disposition toward the world, a disposition ordered toward what is true, good, and beautiful. While much of modern education emphasizes self-discovery or self-expression, Smith Prep, on the other hand, seeks something older and more enduring: the formation of soul, the cultivation of virtuous scholarship.

G.K. Chesterton once said that education is not merely the teaching of subjects, but the transfer of a way of life. That is exactly what we are about. That way of life is modeled by our faculty and staff, embedded in our curriculum, reinforced through liturgy, travel, lectures, service, and shared rhythms, and lived out in community with families.

We begin with a simple but often forgotten truth: our students are more than minds. They are embodied souls, souls made in the image of God. We must, therefore, attend to the whole person. We are not interested in information downloads or content transfer alone. We want to *form* our students. We want to train students minds, bodies, imaginations, affections, and loves.

We want students who understand the Christian faith, who grasp the dignity of being truly human, and who can thoughtfully evaluate and faithfully live in the world God has made. We are not only educating intellects; we are shaping character and temperament. We might say that we are training Christian sensibilities.

Our modern world often educates students for *doing*, but not for *being*. We live in an age of constant motion, constant reaction, and constant noise, an age that often despises contemplation, interiority, and wonder. But without these, education becomes thin. Students may become capable, but not wise. Students may be informed, but often ungrounded, chaff in the winds of political, economic, and social change.

The task before us is not merely to improve education, but to recover it, to rediscover our relationship to reality itself, to Being, and to our place within a cosmos that is meaningful and beautiful.

For most of human history, educators understood that the world has an order, and that human beings must be trained to respond to that order rightly. Some things deserve love. Some things deserve rejection. Education was understood as learning to love what is good and beautiful, and to resist what is false or destructive.

Aristotle said education teaches us to like and dislike what we ought. Plato described the well-formed student as one who learns, from an early age, to delight in beauty and recoil from ugliness—so that when reason awakens, it is welcomed as a friend. Augustine sees education as rightly ordering our love, what he calls *ordo amoris*.

C.S. Lewis warned that when education abandons this task, it produces what he called “men without chests,” people whose intellects are developed, but whose moral and emotional centers are hollow. Smith Preparatory Academy exists because we refuse to accept that outcome for our children.

Truth must be taught, but never alone. Truth severed from goodness and beauty becomes cold and uninhabitable. Students may know what is true, yet find no reason to love it or live by it. As Stratford Caldecott reminds us, beauty is the radiance of truth and goodness. It is what draws us toward both of them.

That is why at Smith Prep, it is not enough to teach *about* flowers. We want students to smell the flowers. We want them to sing, to create, to read great stories, to study history with reverence, to walk in nature, to sit in silence, to pray, and to wonder. We are instilling tastes and sensibilities that will last a lifetime.

This is what we mean when we say Smith Preparatory Academy offers a *human education*. We are providing an education that awakens students to the colors, textures, sounds, and meaning of creation, while also teaching them to recognize the brokenness of the world and respond with wisdom, courage, and hope.

Now, as we look toward the future, we believe God is calling us to build something enduring. Smith Preparatory Academy has always sought to cultivate virtuous scholars, students who love truth, goodness, and beauty. But we are seeking to build more than a school. We’re seeking to build a *modern abbey*, a place where classical Christian education, spiritual formation, and cultural preservation converge.

In the fifth century, as the Roman world fractured, monastic communities became islands of light. They preserved Scripture, copied ancient texts, cultivated the arts, and kept Christian civilization alive through prayer, study, and work. Thomas Cahill has documented this preservation in his monumental work, “How the Irish Saved Western Civilization.” This moment calls for a similar faithfulness.

Our vision is to acquire land in Central Florida and build a campus inspired by this monastic model. We are currently looking at two plots of land within a just a few miles of our current location and have already started discussions with the owners of these properties. We want to build a place with a chapel at its heart, gardens for contemplation, halls for the humanities and sciences, spaces for the arts, and guilds for the common arts: gardening, woodworking, metalwork, pottery, cooking, and craftsmanship. A place where students learn to work with their hands as well as their minds.

This campus will also be a place of hospitality, a place offering renewal for teachers, pastors, and scholars; hosting lectures, symposia, and conversations; opening classroom museums and galleries to the wider community. It will be, I pray, a kind of Abby, a refuge for thoughtful conversation, a harbor for an abundance of resources, and a place of cultural preservation.

This is not merely a building project. It is much bigger than land and a building. It is a vision for restoration and renewal. It is the conviction that we can build a community for human flourishing. It is the belief that we are called to see the world as sacramental, that we are to be formed by wonder and humility, that we are to align our souls with eternal truths, and that we are to live in joyful submission to the goodness and grandeur of God’s order. This is an act of faith. This is a commitment to preserving what is true, good, and beautiful for generations to come.

From its conception, Smith Preparatory Academy has not been built on fundraising campaigns or development efforts. Smith Prep has been built and sustained by the tuition paid by our families. The tuition of our families has faithfully covered the costs of our school. Faculty and staff salaries, rent, book and resources, and indeed,

all operating costs have been funded through the sacrifices of our families paying a moderate tuition. Through their faithfulness, our school has grown and flourished.

Tonight marks something new. This evening is our first fundraising gala. It is a small gala, but an important one. It marks our first real effort to begin raising funds to support the future of Smith Preparatory Academy.

I honestly don't know how to ask for money. I've never done it before. It's hard for me. Yet, I fully stand behind the work that we are doing at Smith Prep. We are cultivating virtuous scholars, changing lives, educating students, and shaping our world.

To merely begin the work of building this abbey, this sanctuary of education, we would like to raise 2.5 million dollars. 2.5 million dollars is a lot of money. Yet, this amount would merely cover the costs of the price of land in Central Florida for such a project. What we are building here matters, not only for our children, but for the renewal of culture itself.

So tonight, I'm asking you to join us. I'm inviting you to give of your time, your prayers, and your resources. Every act of generosity helps us build a legacy that will shape lives long after we are gone.

Cassiodorus, living amid the collapse of Rome, urged the Church to build when the world was crumbling, to gather students, preserve wisdom, and create sanctuaries of learning and renewal. He believed that even in dark times, the faithful could build places where truth would be remembered and virtue cultivated. That same call stands before us today. In a world that is often confused about truth, uncertain about goodness, and indifferent to beauty, together we are building a place where all three will be taught, loved, and lived.

Let us build a modern abbey together. Let us build a place where our minds are illumined by truth, our hearts are ruled by rightly ordered loves, and our sensibilities trained to discern and delight in beauty. A place where generations of students will learn not only how to make a living, but how to live well, to genuinely flourish.

“And they shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.”

—Isaiah 61:4

Thank you for believing in this work.

Thank you for standing with us tonight.

And thank you for helping build something that will endure long after all of us are gone.

May God bless you, and may He bless Smith Preparatory Academy.