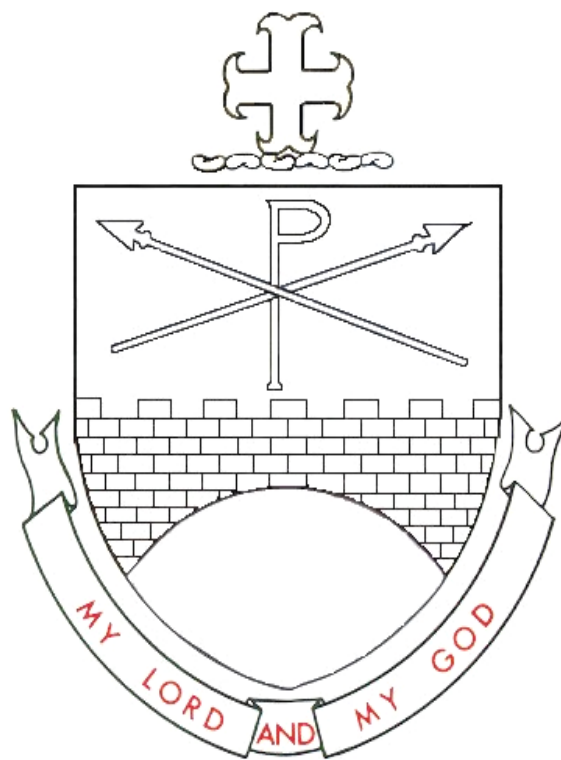


***ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE
Parish Religious Education Program***

***PARENT HANDBOOK
2026 - 2027***



***"To make disciples, as we know, love and serve God and one another."
St. Thomas the Apostle Parish Mission Statement***

ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE PREP

One St. Thomas Plaza

Old Bridge, NJ 08857

www.saintthomasob.com

ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE PARISH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAM (PREP) STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Our Parish Religious Education Program seeks to cultivate a vibrant and growing faith in our students, grounded in the teachings of the Catholic Church. We aim to foster a deeper understanding of the Scriptures, the sacraments, and the rich traditions of our faith. Through engaging and age-appropriate instruction, prayer, and liturgical celebrations, we will help students develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, learn to discern God's will in their lives, and become active, compassionate, and responsible members of the Church and the wider community, living out the Gospel message with joy and fidelity.

ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE PREP STAFF

Andrea Madonna, Parish Catechetical Leader, amadonna@saintthomasob.com

Laura Mechkowski, Administrative Assistant, lmechkowski@saintthomasob.com

Suzanne Taureck, staureck@saintthomasob.com

Kelly Vitale, kvitale@saintthomasob.com

ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE PREP OFFICE HOURS

During PREP Year

Monday: 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM

Tuesday: 9:30 AM to 6:00 PM

Wednesday: 9:30 to 3:30 PM

Thursday: 9:30 AM to 8:00 PM

Summer Hours

Monday: 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM

Tuesday: 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM

Wednesday: 9:30 to 3:30 PM

Thursday: 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM

Please call the PREP Office at 732-251-1660 for information or with any questions about our program.

ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE PARISH

Pastor: Father Jerome Johnson

Associate Pastor: Father John Rozembajgier, JCL

Associate Pastor: Father Joseph Thippabathini

Parish Office Hours

Monday, Wednesday, Friday 9:00am-4:00pm

Tuesday, Thursday 9:00am-7:00pm

Saturday, Sunday 10:30am-1:30pm

July & August (Closed Fridays)

Monday, Wednesday 9:00am-4:00pm

Tuesday, Thursday 9:00am-7:00pm

Saturday, Sunday 10:30am-1:30pm

Mass Schedule

Saturday - 4:00 pm (Vigil)

Sunday – 8:00 AM, 10:00 AM, 12:00 PM

Weekdays - Monday - Friday 8:00 AM, 12:15 PM

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING IMPORTANT MESSAGES:

- **All** communication with our families regarding their child and the PREP Program will be done via email; all handouts and notices will be emailed as well as posted on our website.
- Every family must provide at least one email address that they check daily to participate in our program.
- The best way to stay informed is to check our website: <https://saintthomasob.com/prep-home> for important information regarding your child's PREP class and curriculum.
- Your child's class calendar and required prayers will be on the website <https://saintthomasob.com/prep-parent-page> for you to reference and print. Select your child's grade level and you will be able to print their prayers and their calendar.
- Check the website for scheduled closings due to holidays and other important dates <https://saintthomasob.com/prep-parent-page>.
- Check our website for Emergency Closings due to inclement weather. Families will be notified by email of Emergency Closings.

REGISTRATION

Registration is held in the spring. Please check the parish bulletin and our parish website for registration information. Registration Forms are available in the Parish Office and on our website.

Classes fill on a first come, first served basis. DO NOT WAIT TO REGISTER.

PREP Classes are offered:

- **Monday** – Special Needs, 4:30-5:30pm
- **Tuesday** – Levels 1 thru 7, 4:15-5:45pm
- **Thursday** – Levels 1 thru 7, 6:00-7:30pm
- **Monday Evening** – Confirmation - meets approximately twice a month, 6:45-8:30pm (Schedule TBD)

To Register:

- Families must be registered parishioners of St. Thomas the Apostle Church. New families must register with the Parish prior to registering their children for PREP.
- Your child must have completed all work from the previous PREP year.
- You have no outstanding balance.
- Families of children baptized at parishes other than St. Thomas the Apostle must provide a baptismal certificate at the time of registration for each child.
- Families transferring into our program from another Religious Education program must provide a letter of transfer from the parish they are leaving and copies of all Sacramental Certificates at the time of registration for each child.
- Children who have missed any time in Religious Education may be asked to complete the years missed regardless of current school grade.
- Preparation for the reception of Sacraments is a two-year process for all validly Baptized Catholics. This may require participating in our OCIA program in addition to regular PREP classes.
- No child will be denied Religious Education due to a family's financial restraints. If there is a financial hardship, please contact the PREP Office. You will be required to fill out a Financial Assistance Form and supply your latest Income Tax 1040 form for consideration.
- Once classes start there will be **no refunds** issued if you remove your child from PREP classes.

VOLUNTEERS

We are so grateful to our many volunteers for their time, dedication and preparation they give to the PREP ministry. We ask our parents, high-school teens and other adults to volunteer and help reinforce the value of Catholic Christian education in our community. You can volunteer to become a: Catechist, Classroom Aide, Hall Monitor, Student Buddy. **If you are interested in volunteering, please call the PREP Office at 732-251-1660.**

Please note just like in the public school system, the Diocese of Metuchen requires fingerprinting and background checks for all those over age 18 who regularly come in contact with minors.

CURRICULUM

Children ***“learn”*** religion through experience; particularly by watching and imitating those they love best. **Faith** is something that is ***“caught”*** rather than ***“taught”***. Classroom learning informs, gives data, and reinforces what the children should be experiencing.

There will be times during the year when your child's catechist assigns supplemental work that will need your supervision. In addition, parents of children in all grade levels are asked to teach their children the prayers assigned to each level. Please see our website for grade level prayers. At the discretion of the catechist and PCL, a student may not be allowed to continue to the next level if he/she has not completed assigned work and memorized the required prayers.

We use the “Finding God” program published by Loyola Press. This program provides an invitation to a way of living in relationship with family, parish and neighbor. This program provides sound and substantial lessons in faith and delivers those lessons through experiential activities that make these essential lessons part of a lifelong practice. “Finding God” involves the whole child: mind and heart, body and soul.

The children will also learn and experience our faith by hearing the Word of God from the approaching Sunday Liturgy. We explain scripture to the children on their own level of development so that they may participate more fully (along with their families) in our Sunday Liturgies- the centerpiece of our lived faith.

Level 1 (Usually Grade 1)

PRAYERS: Sign of the Cross ~ Our Father ~ Hail Mary ~ Glory Be

“Finding God: Our Response to God’s Gifts” published by Loyola Press.

If your family has not been attending Mass on a regular basis, please make every effort to attend Sunday Liturgy, as your child will be studying the Mass and starting to prepare for First Penance and First Eucharist.

Level 2 (Usually Grade 2)

PRAYERS: Sign of the Cross ~ Our Father ~ Hail Mary ~ Glory Be ~ Act of Contrition ~ Mass Responses

In Level 2, the emphasis shifts to a study of the sacraments as the children review Baptism and prepare for the reception of Reconciliation and Eucharist. Your family’s attendance at weekend Mass is of the utmost importance to your child’s readiness to receive these sacraments.

To initiate children into the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we use the program *“Rejoice” - First Reconciliation* published by Loyola Press. The book offers powerful lessons to help the children and their parents learn and prepare for the Sacrament of Reconciliation through prayer, active learning and videos. It also gives the child an opportunity for moral education and conscience formation.

To initiate children into the Eucharist, we use the program *“Rejoice” – First Communion* published by Loyola Press. Through their life experience (as presented in this program), the child gradually and progressively is initiated into the life of the Eucharist, culminated by their First Communion.

Level 3 (Usually Grade 3)

PRAYERS: Grace Before & After Meals ~ Our Father ~ Hail Mary ~ Glory Be ~ Sign of the Cross ~ Act of Contrition ~ Prayer to St. Michael

"Finding God: Fishers of Men – Church & Holy Spirit" published by Loyola Press.

Level 4 (Usually Grade 4)

PRAYERS: Apostles' Creed ~ Act of Contrition ~ Prayer to St. Michael

"Finding God: Blessed Are the Poor – Beatitudes & the Ten Commandments" is published by Loyola Press.

Level 5 (Usually Grade 5)

PRAYERS: Rosary/Mysteries ~ Apostles' Creed ~ Act of Contrition ~ Prayer to St. Michael

"Finding God: The Bread of Life – Sacraments & Worship" published by Loyola Press.

CONFIRMATION PREPARATION (Levels 6, 7 & 8)

Our parish preparatory program for the Sacrament of Confirmation is based upon the teaching of the U.S. National Directory for Catechesis, which reads that parishes should present catechesis for Confirmation that:

- Teaches that Confirmation increases and deepens the grace of Baptism, imprinting an indelible character on the soul.
- Teaches that Confirmation strengthens the baptismal conferral of the Holy Spirit on those confirmed in order to incorporate them more firmly in Christ, to strengthen their bond with the Church, associate them more closely with the Church's mission, increase in them the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and to help them bear witness to the Christian faith in words and deeds.
- Teaches about the role of the Holy Spirit, his gifts, and his fruits.
- Is developmentally appropriate and includes retreat experiences.
- Includes instruction on the Rite of Confirmation and its basic symbols: the imposition of hands, the anointing with Sacred Chrism, and the words of the sacramental formula.
- Ensures that parents and sponsors are involved in the catechetical preparation of the children for Confirmation. (Article 36)

Level 6 (Usually Grade 6)

PRAYERS: Prayer of St. Francis ~ Stations of the Cross ~ Act of Contrition ~ Prayer to St. Michael

"Finding God: I Am Who I Am – The Old Testament" published by Loyola Press.

Level 7 (Usually Grade 7)

PRAYERS: Mass Responses ~ Review of all prayers ~ Prayer to St. Michael

The theme of *"Finding God: – Following Jesus"*.

Level 8 (Usually Grade 8)

PRAYERS: Review of all prayers ~ Prayer to St. Michael

"Confirmed in the Spirit" published by Loyola Press. Each chapter builds on the previous chapter guiding young people to embrace the lifelong Catholic practices of worship, prayer, stewardship, service, pursuit of wisdom and moral decision making as they prepare for Confirmation and the next phase of their lives as Catholics.

Students attend **MANDATORY** Confirmation Sessions approximately twice a month on Monday evenings from 6:45 PM – 8:30 PM. Preparation for Confirmation, in addition to attending the sessions, includes Service, Mass attendance, a Saint Report, Confirmation Retreats and Confirmation rehearsal. The Sacrament of Confirmation is conferred on those students upon the completion of this course. Confirmation preparation is not just a matter of information but of formation—changing lives to be more Catholic.

FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

As mandated by our Bishop, a Safe Environmental Program by Virtus is taught to your children. This program is called "Empowering God's Children". It is a series of videos teaching Boundaries and Safety References to your children. VIRTUS is a registered trademark of National Catholic Services in the United States.

Each year the children will receive two of the following lesson plans following a three-year cycle according to our Diocese:

- Lesson 1- Physical Boundaries: Safe and Unsafe Touching Rules.
- Lesson 2- Safe Adults, Safe Touches and Special Safe Adults.
- Lesson 3- Boundaries: You Have Rights!
- Lesson 4- Secrets, Surprises and Promises.
- Lesson 5- Being a Safe Friend.
- Lesson 6- Boundaries: Feelings and Facts.

SPECIAL NEEDS PREP

Special Needs classes are held every Monday in our school from 4:30 to 5:30 PM. Registration is necessary. Please contact the PREP Office at #732-251-1660 for further information.

WORSHIP – MASS ATTENDANCE

Family participation in Mass is the cornerstone of our educational program. As the primary educators of your children, it is essential for you to remain committed to the Church. Attend weekend Liturgies with your children, allowing them to witness both the young and the elderly engaging in communal prayer and celebration. Keep in mind that they are unable to attend on their own; therefore, as their most significant role models, it is your responsibility to guide them.

CHILDREN'S CATECHUMENATE – Two Year Process and Commitment

For children who have been baptized but have no formal religious education and HAVE NOT received their First Eucharist.

- First Year
These children will attend PREP classes on their grade level, and after the first year will be accepted into the Children's Catechumenate.
- Second Year
These children will attend regular PREP classes on their grade level, and will receive **additional instruction on a different day**. Parental support, guidance, example and participation are mandatory during the catechumenate process.

PROGRESS REPORTS

Progress Reports are distributed in January and at the end of the PREP year. It is a good policy to discuss the report with your child. **Progress Reports MUST BE SIGNED by the parent and returned to PREP the following week.**

ARRIVAL / DISMISSAL / PARKING LOT POLICY

All drivers who enter the St. Thomas parking lot are expected to demonstrate the highest level of courtesy and respect to ensure everyone's safety. **DO NOT PASS THROUGH ANY CONED-OFF AREAS.** This includes the 'Safety Zone' barrier running from St. Thomas School to the opposite end of the parking lot, the exit to Route 18 and the Barkley Avenue entrance/exit leading into the parking lot. The area is coned off to provide a 'Safety Zone' for students to line up and assemble during arrival, dismissal, during fire drills and for emergencies. Failure to respect the Safety Zone and deliberately run through the cones can potentially result in a ticket from the O.B.P.D or dismissal from the PREP Program. See the back page for a map of the coned off area. Please note the Barkley Road driveway and the Route 18 exit in front of St. Thomas School IS NOT open for entrance or exit during this time.

ARRIVAL

1. When possible, students will line up outside in the "Safety Zone" by grade. Supervision of your children begins five minutes before class time. Please do not leave children unsupervised in the parking lot.
2. During inclement weather, students can enter the school building as soon as they arrive and will line up in the school hallways. Parents can pull up to the front doors of the school building and drop off their students. Have your child exit the car on the right side of the vehicle on to the sidewalk.

DISMISSAL

1. Park your vehicle in any of the empty parking spots.
2. Leave your car and proceed to the front doors of the school.
3. Parents must meet their child at the front doors of the school. Children ARE NOT PERMITTED to meet their parents in front of the church, down the sidewalk or roam the parking lot looking for their ride home.
4. DO NOT PARK IN THE FIRE LANE while waiting for *your child*. THE FIRE LANE INCLUDES THE FRONT OF THE SCHOOL BUILDING. Do not park along the sidewalk in front of the school. You will receive a ticket from O.B.P.D.
5. Proceed *with your child* to your *parked* vehicle.
6. The Barkley Road driveway IS NOT open for entrance or exit.
7. The Highway 18 exit in front of the school IS NOT open for exit.
8. When the dismissal bell rings, the children will be dismissed from the front doors of the school.
9. Children will not be permitted to go home with a visibly impaired driver, if necessary, the police will be called.
10. Parents are responsible for ensuring timely pick-up of their children from PREP. Regular late pick-ups are difficult on PREP staff and will be addressed by the PCL.

ATTENDANCE

- **The Diocese of Metuchen only allows 3 absences per year.**
- Parents must notify the PREP Office if their child is going to be absent. If your child is absent, please send in or email a note of explanation or a doctor's note by their next class.
- Students are expected to be present and prepared for each class; this includes bringing their book to class.
- Students are expected to make up the missed work due to an absence/illness.
- Excessive absences make it impossible for your child to grasp concepts. Perhaps more importantly - a child who only comes occasionally will not have a sense of "*belonging*". Developing a sense of community and an identity with the parish are vital aspects of our overall program.
- Students absent from more than three (3) classes, (any combination of absences, early dismissal or lateness, that equals 3) may be required to complete SUMMER HOME STUDY under the guidance of a parent before advancing to the next level. You will be notified if home study is necessary. If excessive absences occur, the student may have to repeat the same level again.
- If your child becomes ill, you will be called and asked to pick up your child in the PREP Office.

EARLY DISMISSAL

- 1 Early Dismissal = 1/2 Absence - Child leaves prior to 5:35 PM OR 7:20 PM.
- Please do not schedule doctor/dentist appointments during class time.
- Early dismissal of any type of sports related activity is not permitted.
- The PREP Office must be notified by email or a note from the parents prior to class if a student will be leaving early. Parents must ring the PREP doorbell, sign out their child and a staff member will get the child from the classroom.

LATENESS

- 1 LATE ARRIVAL = 1/2 ABSENCE - Child arrives after 4:25 PM OR 6:10 PM.

Lateness and Early Dismissal interferes greatly with a child's progress. It also disrupts the Catechist, the Lesson and the other students.

BEHAVIOR

It is PREP Policy to discipline with love and understanding. Catechists will assist students in setting classroom guidelines that reinforce Christian attitudes. Jesus asks us to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. As we all strive to follow Jesus, we must be aware of showing respect and courtesy to each other.

PREP catechists are VOLUNTEERS and are not expected to handle serious or on-going discipline problems. Parents, your cooperation is necessary in helping your child to live God's law of love in the classroom. For students who have a problem with classroom behavior, HOME STUDY may be the solution (if available). This would require the parent to work with the child at home, while reporting on the child's progress to the PREP Office.

- If a student is sent to the PREP office for behavior issues a parent MUST COME to the office to pick up that student.
- Any student who is unwilling to cooperate with the "Student Code of Behavior" will be asked to withdraw from the Religious Education Program.

STUDENT CODE OF BEHAVIOR

- Students are expected to show respect to all in their words and actions.
- Students must conform to the attendance policy stated in this handbook.
- Students should comply with the classroom rules set out by the Catechist in the interest of providing a good learning environment.
- Students should not do anything that could cause physical harm to themselves or to others.
- Students must not destroy, deface or remove property from the building.
- Students are responsible for completing all in-class and homework assignments to the best of their ability and according to the time schedule provided.
- Students are not to chew gum or wear a hat or hood during class time.
- Students are not to get out of their seat without permission.
- Students who exhibit any inappropriate behavior (in the judgment of the PCL) will be asked to withdraw from the program.

CELL PHONE POLICY

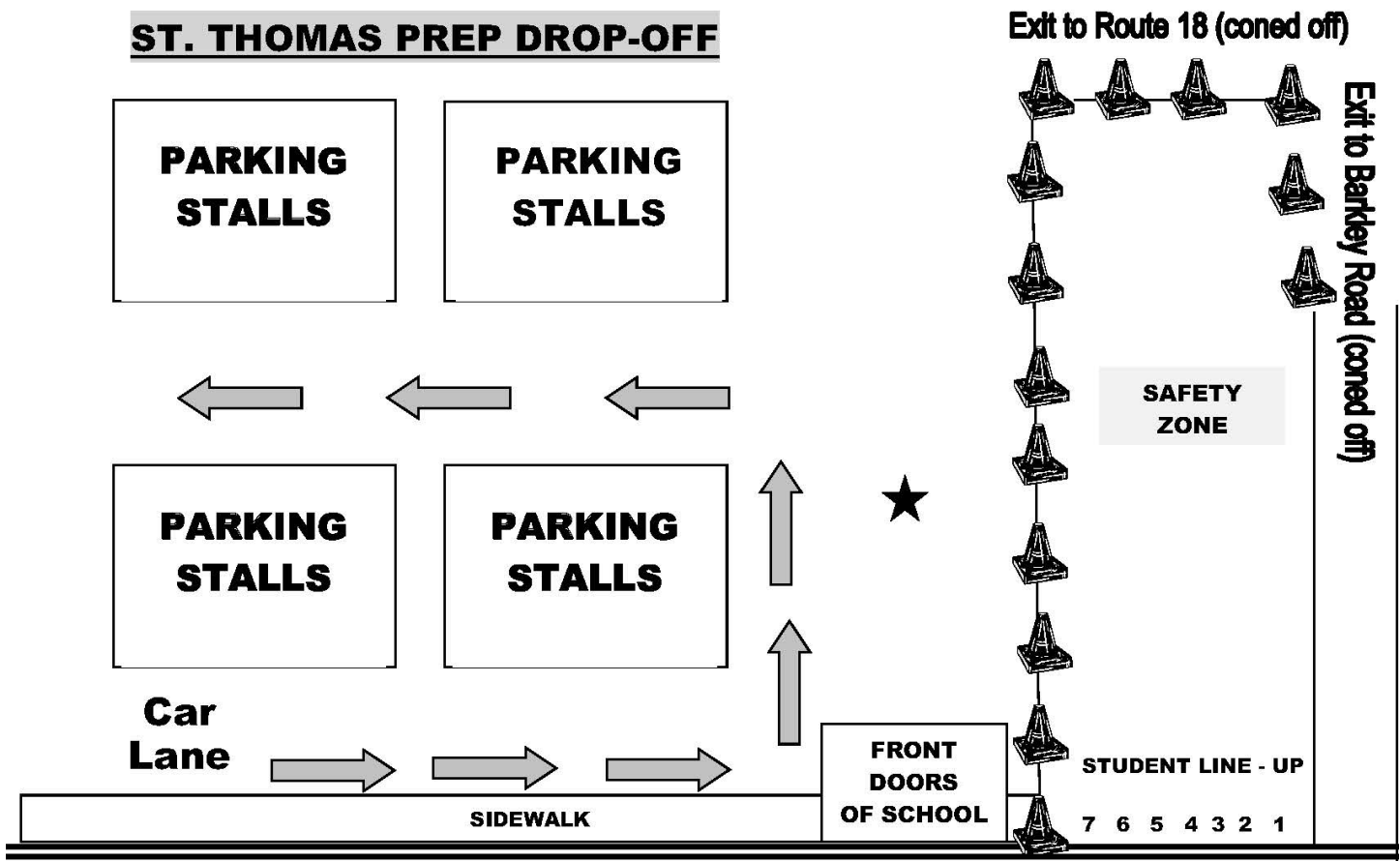
Cell phones may be brought to St. Thomas the Apostle PREP under the following conditions:

- Phones **MUST** be in the OFF POSITION and KEPT OUT OF SIGHT for the entire duration of all educational activities including, but not limited to, classroom instruction, class trips, church visitation, etc. Cell phones must be kept out of sight upon entering the building and until the student has left the building. If a cell phone is brought out during class, the catechist will collect it and turn it over to the PREP office. A parent will need to retrieve the cell phone from the PREP Office.
- Do not text or call your child during PREP class. Contact the PREP office with concerns by calling 732-251-1660. We will relay all messages to your child.
- **NO** cell phones can be used for picture taking.
- **NO** harassment or threatening of persons via cell phones is permitted.
- Cell phones may not be used for game playing, internet, email access, conversations, music, gambling or making purchases of any kind.
- **NO** other communications devices are allowed.
- Those who violate any of the rules regarding cell phones or other devices will forfeit their privilege of bringing them to PREP and may be asked to leave the program.

GENERAL POLICIES

- Please notify the PREP Office **immediately** if you have a change of address, telephone number or email address. It is important for us to have your most current information. **Transcripts can be requested if you are moving out of the parish.**
- **CHILD ABUSE POLICY** - New Jersey State Statutes require that the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) be notified immediately if a Catechist and/or Parish Catechetical Leader suspects that a child has been abused.
- **CUSTODY** - In the case where the custody of a student has been restricted by the courts, a copy of the court document **MUST BE on file in the PREP Office.** St. Thomas PREP abides by the provisions of the Buckley Amendment. Thus, non-custodial parents will be given access to academic records and to information regarding the academic progress of their children, **unless there is a court order specifically stating that the non-custodial parent is denied access to such information.**
- **FIRE / EVACUATION / LOCK-DOWN DRILLS** - These drills will be conducted during the year to ensure the safety of our students. In the event of an actual emergency, children will be taken to a pre-arranged evacuation area.
- **FOOD ALLERGIES** - It is the goal of St. Thomas PREP to provide an allergen-free environment for children with food allergies. Recognizing that strict avoidance of the allergen is the only way to prevent a potentially life-threatening reaction, we ask your cooperation with the following policy: **NO FOOD AND DRINK OF ANY KIND WILL BE PERMITTED IN ST. THOMAS SCHOOL DURING PREP CLASSES.**
- **ILLEGAL SUBSTANCES & WEAPONS** - Drugs, alcohol, tobacco and weapons of any kind are not allowed on Church property. If a student is found to be in possession, the student will be detained until the police are notified.

ST. THOMAS PREP DROP-OFF



ST. THOMAS PREP PICK-UP

