

Students from Plainville Catholic School are pictured with Sister Ligouri (center) and Sister Evangeline Thomas (right) in 1928. Photo courtesy of Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia Archive

# Catholic schools in the Salina Diocese reflect national trends

STORY BY KAREN BONAR • THE REGISTER



Sister Luella Hake, CSJ, is pictured at St. Mary's School in Herndon in 1969. Four religious orders of sisters taught at dozens of Catholic schools across the Salina Diocese over the course of history. Photo courtesy of Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia Archive

**S**ALINA — While the Salina Diocese is rural, it keeps pace with the nation-wide Catholic education trends.

Nationally, about 1.7 million students are currently enrolled in Catholic schools, said Kevin Baxter, the chief innovation officer of the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA).

"We were last at that number at about 1920," he said, and added the curve of Catholic education has expanded and shrunk on a national scale, with a peak in 1965.

"There was tremendous growth," Baxter said of Catholic education in the 1960s. "At that time, we had about 5.5 million kids in Catholic schools."

**IN THE SALINA** Diocese, there were 16 elementary schools in 1900, which catered to about 1,800 students. According to the Official Catholic Directory, in 2019, the diocese had 11 elementary schools that served about 1,600 students.

In 1960, there were 10 Catholic high schools (parish and private) and 20 grade schools. A decade later, in 1970, the number dropped to seven high schools (parish and private) and 14 elementary schools.

The Second Vatican Council concluded at the end of 1965, and Father James Hoover said the changes were being implemented.

"After Vatican II, schools were closing right and left," he said. "Bishop (Cyril) Vogel told me, 'Don't let anyone close.'"

Father Hoover served as superintendent of Catholic schools for the Salina Diocese from 1971-80 and as director of religious education from 1972-80. Once appointed, Father Hoover said he visited dioceses around the region, searching for a sustainable answer for Catholic education. A prevailing concern at the time was the diocese would dictate how all schools would operate.

"I challenged them and told them that every parish would be on their own," he said. "They would have to

raise the money and have to make it work independently. The pastor, the teachers, the school council had to make it work. They knew they could raise the money to keep their schools going."

**IN ADDITION TO TEACHING** in both public and parish schools over the years, Father Hoover attended St. Francis Xavier School in Junction City.

"The sisters were the secret in Junction City, as they were in a lot of towns," Father Hoover said.

The assignments for the school year were always handed out on Aug. 15, and he said the arrival of the sisters was always a memorable event.

"On Aug. 16, we had guys gathered through the town watching for them," he said. "We didn't have cell phones then, but we had other ways of getting the word out. By the time the sisters got there, 20 cars would be there with fathers and mothers watching."

"As soon as they got there, the kids would carry the suitcases up to the rooms. Then we'd eat with the sisters on the porch or on the grass, and we kids would love every moment of it. We were just thrilled when our favorite teacher came back."

**SISTER BERNADINE** Pachta, CSJ, is the archivist for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia. She spent about a decade working in schools, as a young sister, teaching in Junction City, Pfeifer, Collyer and Salina.

The school in Pfeifer was a public one but had religious teachers.

"We would have Mass early and teach religion first thing, then from 9 to 4 was school," Sister Bernadine said. "That was especially common in Ellis County and western Kansas. That was the tenor of the times. You think somebody might raise their eyebrows and say, 'Sisters can't be in the (public school) classroom,' but that wasn't the case in Kansas."

She recalled wearing her full habit while teaching in the public school without any incident. In fact, she said the sisters felt welcomed as teachers in public schools.

"People loved it. In the

years I taught, I'm pretty sure I didn't have anyone who wasn't Catholic," Sister Bernadine said. "A lot of that area is very Catholic."

Sister Sally Witt, of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, Pa., recently published a book titled "Beyond the Frontier: The History of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia, KS." Part of the history chronicled includes the sisters' relationship with Catholic education.

"In 1909, when the sisters accepted the school at Park, the residents arranged that they would come as employees of the school district," Sister Sally wrote. "A year later, they went to Leoville under the same plan (p. 91)."

"According to the general practice in their public schools, sisters held religion classes first thing in the morning. The other lessons, which were to be separated from religion, followed (p. 179)."

Father Hoover said during his priesthood, he was a substitute teacher at the public high school in Mankato.

"I didn't get paid anything, and I could not discuss religion unless the kids brought it up," he said. "But if they brought it up, we could talk about it."

**CATHOLIC EDUCATION** WAS a commitment from a parish and community.

According to the "Parochial History Questionnaire" dated April 12, 1962, from Atwood, the parish rallied to build a Catholic school. The total cost of the building was almost \$170,000 in 1954, and many parish members volunteered time and skill to complete the project. Volunteers unloaded more than 36,000 bricks and 2,400 sacks of cement, which were used in the building.

Yet it wasn't only the school that was required for sisters to teach.

"We cannot bring sisters into the parish unless we provide adequate living for them," the historical document reads. "The plan has been — and still is — to convert the present parish house into a sisters' convent and to build a new rectory for the priests."

While initial plans called for the Sisters of St. Joseph



The parochial school, St. Joseph Catholic School, was built in 1885, near St. Joseph. Pictured are students standing in front of the St. Joseph Catholic School. This photo was taken before the fire that destroyed the original frame church in 1908 (visible on the right side of the photo). Register archive photo

of Concordia to staff the school, it was the School Sisters of Notre Dame, with motherhouse in Omaha, Neb., who provided the first instructors for the Catholic school in Atwood.

Other religious orders who taught in the diocese include The Sisters of the Precious Blood from Wichita, Sisters of St. Agnes from Fond du Lac, Wis., and the Sisters of St. Benedict from Atchison.

**A SIGNIFICANT, VISIBLE** change over time in schools is the educators.

"In 1920 or so, about 96 or 97 percent of the staff of Catholic schools were mostly women religious," Baxter said, and added the remaining were lay teachers. "That percentage has completely flipped now about 96 to 97 percent of staff is laity, and only three or four percent is religious."

The Sisters of St. Joseph mirrored this trend, wrote Sister Sally.

"The decline in the number of sisters had immediate effects on the small schools in western Kansas. Congregations with large schools could reduce the number of sisters by one or two, but that was not possible where there were only two or three classroom teachers (p. 237)," Sister Sally wrote.

The decline of sisters and schools continued in the late '60s.

"In 1968 and 1969 alone, the sisters left a total of 13 schools. Nine were parish schools, three were public schools and one was their own apostolic school," Sister Sally wrote. "This was painful, unprecedented and unforeseen. While large schools throughout the country could continue with fewer sisters, this was not possible for the many small schools of the Concordia sisters (p. 241)."

One such school was St. Ann's School in Clyde, where sisters had taught for 81

years before the school was closed in 1969. The sisters departed from both Catholic and public schools, leaving the public schools in Tipton and Antonino in 1974.

In 1970, there were 56 teaching positions open, but only 32 sisters available to fill them. At the time, the sisters served 30 elementary schools (19 within the Salina Diocese) and six high schools (five within the diocese).

In May, the final Sister of St. Joseph of Concordia, Sister Pauline Kukula, CSJ, retired from Sacred Heart Junior High School in Salina. There are now no religious sisters teaching in Catholic schools within the diocese (story on p. 1).

**WHILE SOME OF THE** rural schools in the Salina Diocese closed due to low numbers, Baxter said the NCEA has been exploring enrollment.

"When I became a principal in 2001, if you were under 200 kids, you were on

the closure list," he said.

When the NCEA examined Catholic school enrollment nationally, it found that 1,500 of 6,000 Catholic schools across the country have enrollment of 150 kids or less. Of the 15 Catholic schools in the Salina Diocese, five had fewer than 100 students in the 2019-20 academic school year: St. Joseph (Oakley), St. John (Hanover), Tipton Catholic (Tipton), Sacred Heart (Plainville) and St. Mary (Ellis).

While the assumption once would have been to close small schools, it isn't always the case now.

"If you have three dozen kids in your high school, if it's financially sustainable, it's considered a healthy school," Baxter said. "If you can be fiscally stable with 100 kids in school, that's OK."

One area the NCEA is exploring is collaboration for small schools.

"One thing we're thinking through now is if we blend a micro and virtual school model," he said. "With a Catholic micro-school model, we have strong faith formation and Catholic identity, academic excellence and it is fiscally sustainable. Can we take online instruction and mold something creative and innovative for a small community?"

**ANOTHER FACET OF** Catholic education is its relationship with public schools. Baxter said the economics are significant.

"We estimate we save the country about \$22 billion in education funding every year," he said of Catholic schools. "If kids (enrolled in Catholic schools) went to public schools, it would cost the country an additional \$22 billion."

Sister Sally said Catholic schools in Rooks County had a direct relationship with the public schools.

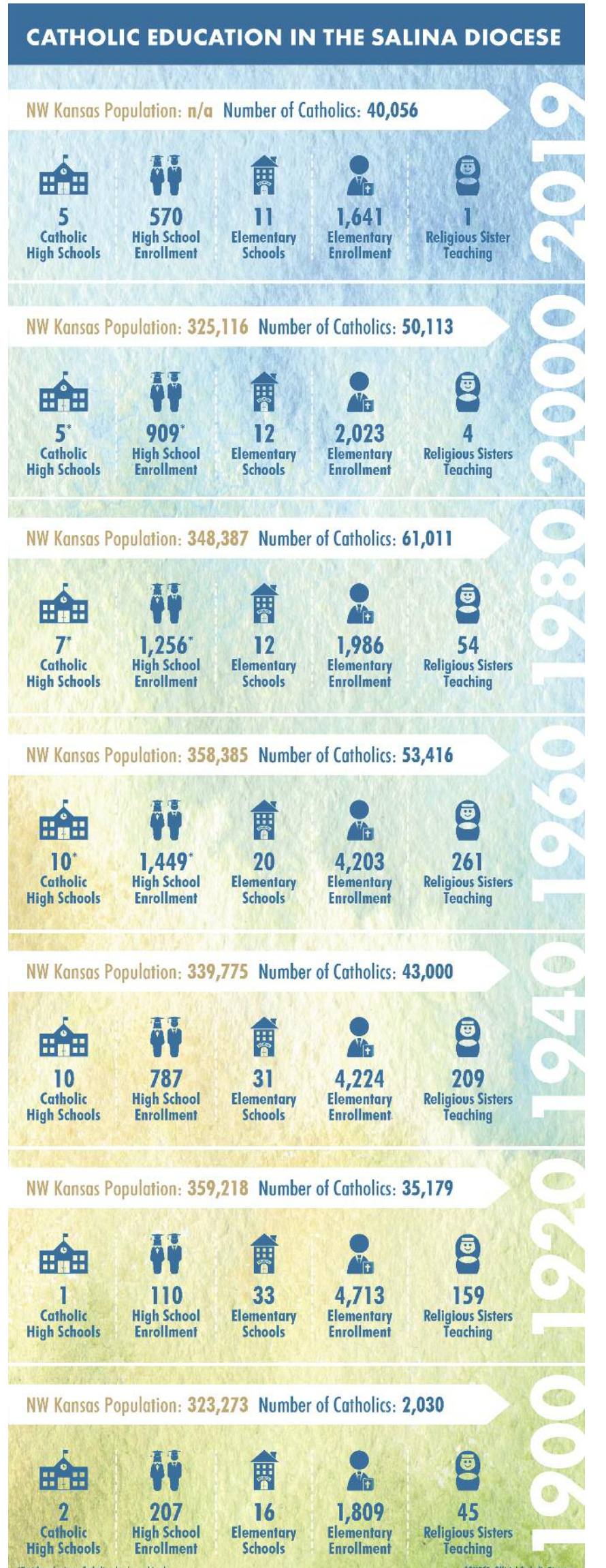
"The school building at Sacred Heart Parish in Plainville was condemned in late summer 1959," Sister Sally wrote. "It was almost time for the new school year to begin, and the local school district would have found it difficult to take in 200 additional students at short notice ... by remaining during the interim, the sisters had helped to save the school district between \$15,000 and \$20,000 (p. 210)."

**CONTINUING TO PROVIDE** Catholic education is important, Father Hoover said.

"Without Catholic education, you don't have values," he said. "Without values, you have nothing."

Baxter said faith provides an anchor and guide for students during their formative years.

"A faith-based education is vitally important to ensuring we're educating kids to be whole people," he said, rather than focusing solely on academics. "We know education at its root is forming people, mind, body and soul. A faith-based education addresses that we want kids to be smart, good, but also civically engaged. We're teaching them not just successful in business or industry. We want them to be good people."



# Beloit family embraces full-time education from home

By Karen Bonar

The Register

**BELOIT** — With baby Fulton nestled in her lap chewing on a wooden rosary, Amanda Ring helps her 7-year-old son, Dominic, sound out words from his phonics book.

“We didn’t set out to be homeschoolers,” she said. “It happened by accident.”

Their oldest, Noah, is 13, and the journey began with him.

“We went on a tour for preschool, and Noah just seemed a little young,” she said. “We thought we’d just homeschool for preschool. We enjoyed the flexibility and doing everything at home with him, especially seeing him learn to read. Then we said, ‘Maybe we’ll just homeschool for kindergarten, too.’

“It just grew from there. It’s a natural extension of how we parent.”

**THE FAMILY’S SCHOOL** day begins on a set of red chairs, as Amanda and her husband, Brian, lead their seven children in prayer. Once complete, Brian heads to his home office where he works as an accountant, and Amanda sets to educating the children.

Each has a backpack, their own set of books and daily assignments that must be completed.

As 10-year-old Isaac works his way through his math lesson on the one computer they all share for school, Noah lounges in a chair, reading aloud from “Made for Greatness” by Ginny Kochis to his mother. The day’s lesson includes Mother Angelica, including her insistence at God’s will for her to build a TV station. As Noah and Amanda discuss the virtues relating to the story, 3-year-old Caeli twirls around, her pink dress flying.

“I have lofty visions about what the domestic church looks like,” Amanda said, “but often, it looks like this. Having a deep theology conversation with a 13-year-old while the 3-year-old



Photos by Karen Bonar / The Register

Amanda Ring (center) answers a question for Bella while holding baby Fulton. Ring homeschools her children in Beloit. Also pictured (from left) are Noah, 13, Isaac, 10 (in red chair) and Dominic, 10.



Dominic Ring works in his handwriting book, “Writing Our Catholic Faith” by Universal Publishing.

runs circles around me and the baby is drooling on me in the ergo.”

**WHILE NOT FORMALLY** structured, there is a routine to the day.

“It really cuts down the number of people clamoring for my attention or asking permission or don’t know what assignment they’re doing next,” she said. “Our days always follow the same routine.”

The routine begins with

the family’s prayer, and then the children rotate through assignments on the computer, while their siblings work at the dining room table.

Once Fulton, the baby, falls asleep, Amanda will work one-on-one with Simon, who is in kindergarten.

Initially, Amanda said she resisted the idea of recess during their school day.

“But I realize how impor-

“ I thought I couldn’t teach a kid to read. It was terrifying ...and then I realized I taught my son to read. ”

**Amanda Ring**

tant it is for the kids to break things up,” she said. “Not only does it let the kids burn off some energy and let me take a break, but if someone is struggling with something, I’ll pull them in and work one-on-one with them while everyone else is occupied.”

The essential subjects are complete by noon, and the afternoon is spent on individual interest projects, ranging from computer coding to piano to baking.

**INITIALLY**, homeschooling was a convenient way to have flexibility for when her husband needed to travel.

“But when my oldest was

in first grade, I looked into homeschooling from the perspective of a part of my vocation as a mom,” Amanda said. “It was initially something nice to do, but eventually it was a calling and a way of family life.”

While she felt called, it didn’t necessarily mean she felt qualified.

“I thought I could do preschool, but some things scared me,” Amanda said. “I thought I couldn’t teach a kid to read. It was terrifying.”

“I picked up a phonics book because I didn’t want him to be behind when he went to school, and then I realized I taught my son to read.”

**ONE FEAR EARLY** in the experience was inadequacy.

“You are the parent. As the parent, God will give you the graces to get through it,” Amanda said. “No matter how frustrating the day is — if the kids aren’t listening or the computer won’t log into the

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## Tips for educating from home

- **Take care of yourself, as the parent.** “It’s hard because I’m an introvert,” Amanda said. “As cliché as it sounds, if I take the time to wake up before the kids get up, if I sit and write in my prayer journal and read in my devotional — even for 15 minutes — I’m so much more present when the kids wake up.”
- **Have a routine for the day.** It does not have to be a strict schedule, but a normal order of events helps children know what to expect.
- **Start with the littlest kids.** “I learned if I put one-on-one time with the littler kids for 45 minutes right at the beginning of the day while the bigger kids are working independently, it helps the younger kids when I need to work one-on-one with the older kids,” Amanda said.

- **For younger children, have “school only” toys or activities.** “The kids look forward to the things they can only do during school,” she said. “It’s really helpful if it’s not available all day long.”
- **Set clear expectations about when school work will be completed.**
- **Realize you might need to take breaks during the day that the kids might not take at school.** “The kids will go outside and play while I’m putting the baby down for a nap,” Amanda said. When the baby takes an afternoon nap, “everybody has quiet time. I have a chance to have a cup of tea, read a book, get my head on straight, do things like fold laundry or get ready for dinner. We all have a break from each other. I feel like it really helps the kids get along better and helps me to be much more patient with the kids.”

- **Everyone helps.** “Even the cleaning routine so it doesn’t all fall on me,” Amanda said. “Everyone is home making messes together. We’re all here making messes, so we all help pick up.”
- **Change of scene.** “It’s really helpful when we can take school outside when the weather’s nice,” she said. “I can push someone on the swing while I listen to someone doing reading lesson. Sometimes everyone is crazy, and we’ll put our shoes on and go for a walk to burn off energy.”
- **Realize it might not look or feel perfect.** “Sometimes everything is crazy and we’re out of sorts,” Amanda said. At that time, she pushes pause on school. “We’ll take a week to get the house back in order or work on things as simple as manners.”

# Variety of homeschool options exist

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right website or the baby is teething — no matter how crazy it is, God will give you the graces to be able to handle it. It just might not feel like it in the moment.”

While much of the education happens in the home, Amanda said weekly field trips are (or before COVID-19 were) an integral part of the learning process.

“We might home school, but we’re not usually home,” she said. “We’re used to taking school on the road — having field trips. It’s been hard for me, too, even though I’m used to the kids being with me all day. I’m just not used to the at-home dynamic when everything was closed.”

The family also takes a few breaks throughout the year for travel, often on “nonpeak” times when most other families have children in school.

**IN MARCH, GOV. LAURA Kelly** issued an executive order, closing all schools in Kansas. Many schools around the country were also closed, shifting education from the classroom to the child’s home.

Everett Buyarski, the Director of Academic Services at Kolbe Academy in Napa, Calif., said there was a slight uptick in interest in Catholic homeschool offerings in the spring.

“At that time, none of us knew how long it would last,” he said. “Many of us were hopeful schools would reopen. Most parents waited it out.”

With a patchwork of reopening plans for schools across the country, Buyarski said interest crescendoed this summer.

“The interest in what we have has exploded,” he said.

Kolbe Academy was founded as a brick and mor-

tar school in 1980, but pivoted and began focusing on homeschool education in 1987. In 2013, it began offering online homeschool courses for grades 6-12.

While in previous years the school was concerned about screen time for primary students, Buyarski said they evaluated their process and adapted it, opting to add grades K-5 this fall.

Initially, plans were to have one class of online students per grade, but those filled quickly. A second class was added, which also filled quickly. In some grades, a third was added.

“We more than have more than twice as many students as we expected to have,” he said. “We capped enrollment and have a wait list. Our enrollment is up 60 percent for the 2020-21 school year. We’re adding 1,000 more students than we had last year.”

Buyarski said many of their new families never planned to homeschool, prior to COVID-19.

“Some dual income families felt remote learning didn’t work for them as parents were supposed to be working from home,” he said. “That’s the story nation-wide. They have said they can’t do another year of this. They’re looking for an established program that has been doing this.”

“The schools are doing their best (at online education), but this is our eighth year of doing online classes. This is what we do.”

The school’s online classes are completely filled, but it does offer textbook and lesson plans for all grades, he added.

Richard Grablin runs the marketing at Our Lady of Victory School in Post Falls, Idaho. They are the oldest Catholic homeschool company in the country, found-

ed in 1977.

“We’re a lot busier than we have been in past years around this time because of COVID-19,” he said.

Grablin said their program is entirely text books, lesson plans and “pen to paper” that mimic some aspects of a traditional classroom.

“Because schools have gone online, we have families who call and ask about online classes,” he said. “They sigh in relief because they say, ‘I’m sick of the online stuff.’”

**AMANDA SAID BECAUSE** she and Brian chose to homeschool their children, life looks a little different for them than it did for their friends and neighbors who began educating children from home in March.

“I’m managing my own expectations and using a curriculum I chose,” she said. “I can’t imagine how difficult it would be for parents who weren’t expecting to educate at home to do so, and to work within the expectations of the school district.”

Under any circumstance, educating children from home can be difficult, Amanda said.

“A lot of times, it feels like the Lord of the Flies in the moment, but looking back, I realize my kids learned, but in the moment, it might seem like things are crazy,” she said.

When first learning to educate from home, Amanda said it was important for her to allow herself — and her children — some grace.

“If all else fails, take a break. Take a breather. Put on some music, dance it out. Go find something fun to do together and come back later when everything is diffused and everything will be much, much easier,” she said.

## BAPTISMS

**Liam Dolan Boxberger**, son of Dolan and Sarah (Schmidt) Boxberger, was baptized July 19, 2020, by Father Frank Coady at St. Thomas More Church in Manhattan.

**Maren Eichhorn**, daughter of Mike and Courtney Eichhorn, was baptized Aug. 8, 2020, by Father Gnanasekar Kulandai, HGN, at St. Francis Xavier Church in Junction City.

**Lydia Louise Gutowski**, daughter of Mark and Patti (Perkins) Gutowski, was baptized July 19, 2020, by Deacon Brian McCaffrey at St. Thomas More Church in Manhattan.

**Hayes Everett Hentzen**, son of Tony and Shanae (Barnes) Hentzen, was baptized July 18, 2020, by Deacon Larry Erpelding at St. Thomas More Church in Manhattan.

**Gentry Reid Hertel**, son of Jared and Alexis (Oliver) Hertel, was baptized June 26, 2020, by Father Jarett Konrade at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Munjor.

**Daniel Edward Hilger**, son of Daren and Jenny (Wilkerson) Hilger, was baptized July 11, 2020, by Father Nick Parker at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Hays.

**Bennett Joseph Kitchen**, son of Brian and Allison Kitchen, was baptized July 19, 2020, by Father Damian Richards at St. Nicholas of Myra Church in Hays.

**Eloise Therese Lager**, daughter of Marty and Abbie (Allen) Lager, was baptized June 28, 2020, by Father Brian Lager at Sacred Heart Church in Colby.

**Brecklyn Rae Legleiter**, daughter of Brandon and Nicole Legleiter, was baptized July 5, 2020, by Father Damian Richards at St. Nicholas of Myra Church in Hays.

**Adan Nathaniel Lopez-Chavez**, son of Adan Urbano Lopez-Lopez and Maria Esperanza (Chavez) Lopez, was baptized July 18, 2020, by Deacon Wayne Talbot at St. Thomas More Church in Manhattan.

**Blake Jose Martinez**, son of Joseph and Katie (Holub) Martinez, was baptized July 11, 2020, by Father Norbert Dlabal at Sacred Heart Church in Atwood.

**Boon William Metro**, son of Jera Renee Metro, was baptized July 19, 2020, by Father David Metz at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Concordia.

**Beau Lewis Raymer**, son of Clint and Morgan Raymer, was baptized June 24, 2020, by Father Jarett Konrade at St. Nicholas of Myra Church in Hays.

**Everett Luca Reif**, son of Pierce and Tandra Reif, was baptized June 28, 2020, by Father Jarett Konrade at St. Nicholas of Myra Church in Hays.

**Berkley Ann Schmidt**, daughter of Tanner and Wendy (Fields) Schmidt, was baptized July 18, 2020, by Father Norbert Dlabal at Sacred Heart Church in Atwood.

**Shaylee Rose Stremel**, daughter of Cameron and Stephanie (Weber) Stremel, was baptized July 17, 2020, by Father Nick Parker at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Hays.

**Owen Orval Zabokrtsky**, son of Ethan and Rachael (Lampe) Zabokrtsky, was baptized July 11, 2020, by Deacon Brian McCaffrey at St. Thomas More Church in Manhattan.

**Ray Michael Zabokrtsky**, son of Ethan and Rachael (Lampe) Zabokrtsky, was baptized July 11, 2020, by Deacon Brian McCaffrey at St. Thomas More Church in Manhattan.

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