

Baccalaureate Mass for St. Teresa High School

St. Teresa High School

Monday, May 12, 2014

+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki

Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

Reverend Fathers, faculty, staff, students, graduates and their family and friends, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ: It is a joy to be with you today to celebrate this Baccalaureate Mass in conjunction with the graduation of the senior class of St. Teresa High School. With gratitude for the many blessings that the Lord has bestowed upon these students over the past four years, we come to the altar to offer our greatest form of thanksgiving to Him in the celebration of the Eucharist.

In our Gospel for today's Mass, we are presented with the familiar image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. This image has been depicted in various ways throughout the life of the Church. In fact, the image of the Good Shepherd could be found frequently in the catacombs around Rome where the early Christians were buried and where the faithful would gather to worship God in secret to avoid the persecution of the Roman Empire.

Many of the images that we see of the Good Shepherd today are fairly serene and pleasant to look at, showing Jesus tenderly carrying a sheep over His shoulders or looking peacefully over the flock as they graze in a field. While these images are beautiful reminders of the loving care that Christ has for His flock, such depictions only capture a part of what Jesus is trying to communicate when He speaks of Himself as the Good Shepherd.

In John's Gospel, we hear Jesus tell His disciples: "A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). By saying this, He is highlighting the fact that the role of the shepherd is not an easy one. The shepherd must be ever vigilant in protecting the sheep from the dangers that they will face, being willing to sacrifice himself for the sheep. The role of the shepherd is therefore to be understood as involving many challenges and dangers, resulting in a life that is often more intense than some depictions might lead us to believe.

There is a vivid image of the Good Shepherd which brings forth this reality. It is a painting done in the late 19th century by a British artist by the name of Alfred Soord. In his painting, Jesus is shown on the edge of a steep and rocky cliff, reaching out to a sheep that is falling into the ravine.



THE GOOD SHEPHERD
BY PHILIPPI NOEL
1872

A close look at the painting shows some thorn branches sticking to His arm, signifying His struggle to climb through the thicket to get to the sheep. Lurking nearby is a bird of prey, ready to descend on the defenseless sheep who is about to plunge to its death.

This image shows a different side of the Good Shepherd, one which better depicts Jesus' description of Himself as laying down His life for His sheep. It shows how far He is willing to go to rescue us when we have wandered far from Him and His Church. His willingness to sacrifice Himself for us is seen most explicitly in His crucifixion and death where He offered Himself completely for us so that we might be saved from the enemy of sin and death.

The image of the Good Shepherd who is willing to, and indeed already has laid down His life for us should be a source of great encouragement for us. It reminds us that Christ is always willing to reach out to us and rescue us from the difficulties that we face along our journey in life and there is no obstacle that we face that is too great for Him to overcome in order to rescue us.

Aware of His care for us and His desire to save us at all costs, we must be careful to not take His protection for granted. It is a very dangerous thing to stray from the watchful care of the shepherd, presuming that if we get too far off track that He will pull us out of trouble. While it is true that He is able to save us from even the most perilous circumstances, He will not save us against our will. By wandering away from Christ and His Church, we slowly become less accustomed to the voice of the Good Shepherd as He calls out to us. We often choose to listen to the other voices vying for our attention and follow them, voices which promise money, pleasure, power, success, and so many other things which seem so attractive to us. If our lives are focused exclusively on listening to these voices, we may have grown so distant from the voice of the Good Shepherd that we will not hear Him or even want to listen to Him when we find ourselves in the midst of danger.

As you all prepare to depart from your years of Catholic education here at St. Teresa High School, you will enter a world where those voices, in many cases, will grow in intensity. There will be many temptations to follow those voices and drift from the voice of the Good Shepherd as He speaks to us through the regular practice of your faith.

You have received a great blessing in your Catholic education from which you have been given the tools necessary to distinguish among the many voices calling out for you to follow. This formation in your faith, if used properly, will assist you in navigating the many situations and decisions with which you will be faced in the years ahead. By living your life according to this foundation in our Catholic faith and continuing to build on that foundation, you will come to experience what Christ promises when He says: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

This abundance of life that Christ promises is one that far exceeds anything this world may offer to you. Even though you may find pleasure in the passing things this world promises, they will ultimately pass away. The peace and joy that comes from following our Catholic faith will far exceed the things of this world and will remain for eternity in Heaven, the only goal which really matters for us as Christians.

The question that I encourage each of you to consider today is this: Which voice are you listening to in your life as you come to this important point in your journey? Is it the voice of the world which says: “I’m finally finished with Catholic school, now I can live my own way, I can do what I

want, when I want, and how I want"? Or, is it the voice of the Good Shepherd who says to us: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25)?

I pray that you will always listen to the voice of Christ, the Good Shepherd, and remain close to Him and His Church. Your Catholic education here at St. Teresa's has given you a good start by setting you on the right path. For this, we give profound gratitude to God. As we continue our celebration of the Eucharist, pray that the Lord who has begun this good work in you will assist you in the years ahead to continue along that path, confident that by following Him, He will provide you with the wisdom and guidance to resist those voices which promise so much, but in the end only lead to emptiness. By always following the voice of the Good Shepherd, you will come to experience that abundance of life not only here, but forever in Heaven to where we all hope to graduate and be awarded with the title of saints of God, sharing eternal happiness with Him and one another.

May God give us this grace. Amen.