

**Baccalaureate Mass for St. Teresa High School**

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**Monday, May 9, 2016**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers, faculty, staff, students, graduates and their family and friends, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here to celebrate this Baccalaureate Mass in conjunction with the graduation of the senior class of St. Teresa High School. At the conclusion of these four years of Catholic education for these students, we fittingly come to the altar for this celebration of the Eucharist to express our thanksgiving to God, recognizing that all the good that you have received has passed through His loving hands.

Having just celebrated the Ascension of the Lord yesterday, we join the Church in looking forward to the great Feast of Pentecost next Sunday, that wonderful day when the Lord sent the promised Holy Spirit upon His apostles, thus marking the visible birth of the Church in the world. In many ways, these two feast days offer some fitting parallels to what all of you are experiencing as you prepare to graduate from high school.

In the account of the Ascension as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, we hear that after Jesus was lifted up and taken from their sight, the disciples were described as “looking intently at the sky as he was going” (Acts 1:10). Although the Scriptures do not say how long it was that they were gazing upward, we can imagine that it may have been for more than just a few seconds. We can also imagine what might have been going through their minds as He disappeared from their sight. I do not think it would be a stretch to suggest that there may have been a little anxiety in their hearts, for the Lord had just commissioned them to continue doing the work that He had begun, yet without Him there to guide them. The uncertainty about what was to follow could very well have been very intimidating to them.

You, too, may be experiencing some anxiety at this moment in your life. Even if you have a general idea as to what the next step entails, there is no doubt plenty of uncertainty about what lies ahead for you in your lives. The familiarity of the routine that has characterized your life here in high school is about to go away and you are going to be expected to adjust to many new things. Change is rarely easy, and we do our best to avoid it, but this is something that cannot be avoided.

Take comfort, however, in knowing that this transition does not have to be dominated by feelings of fear or doubt. Returning to the account of the Ascension, we hear that as the disciples were looking up, “two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven’” (Acts 1:10-11). These men in white, who tradition understands to be angels, remind the disciples of the promise that Jesus had made to them before departing from them, that He would send His Holy Spirit to be with them and to guide them in fulfilling the command to spread the Gospel message to every corner of the world. They were not, after all, going to do this work alone, but they would be assisted by the gift of His Spirit. In Luke’s Gospel, it says that they “returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (Luke 24:52) for they knew that He would indeed keep that promise, which He did ten days later on the Feast of Pentecost.

The same promise given by Jesus to His apostles is given to you, that the Holy Spirit will be given to you to be with you and to guide you. Unlike those apostles who had to wait to receive this gift, you have already received it, first in Baptism, and then in a deeper way on the day of your

Confirmation. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit have been given to you to assist you as you face every situation which you will encounter as you move forward. These gifts are not magic, however. For example, the gifts of knowledge and understanding do not guarantee that you will grasp all of the information in your college courses with ease, thus eliminating the need to study. Rather, these gifts are there to assist you in living your life as a faithful Catholic. All gifts can be either used or rejected by shelving them, giving them away, discarding or returning them unopened. This applies to the gifts of the Holy Spirit: if we expect to reap some benefit from them, we must open them, learn how to use them, and put them into practice.

While all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit will be beneficial to you during this time of transition, I would like to mention two of them. The first is the gift of the fear of the Lord. I do not mention this to instill within you a sense of fear of punishment or disapproval if you do not continue with the practice of your faith as you head to college. While this type of fear can be an effective motivator in keeping us going to Mass, it is not the one that characterizes a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

Primarily, this gift entails a profound respect for the majesty of God who is the Supreme Being. Here, a person realizes his “creatureliness” and dependency upon God, and never would want to be separated from this loving God. This gift of fear arouses in the soul a vibrant sense of adoration and reverence for the majesty of God and a sense of horror and sorrow for sin.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, fear of the Lord is humbly recognizing the truth of the words of Jesus when He said the following, as recorded in John’s Gospel: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). God has created us out of pure generosity. He did not need to create us, and He does not need us for anything. But, He *has* created us and given us everything that we have. We are to receive that with a supreme sense of wonder and awe (another name given to this gift of the Holy Spirit).

The Bible tells us that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.<sup>2</sup> The truly wise person recognizes that our life on earth should be geared toward the everlasting life that awaits us all. Our fear, then, is one of ever being separated from the wonderful gift of divine love that is the key to happiness in this life and hereafter in eternity.

Fostering this gift will be of great benefit to you as you move forward, for it will help you to keep the proper perspective that everything that you have is a gift, and out of an awareness of your dependency on God, you will use those gifts according to His will for you and for the good of the Church, not just your own pursuits.

The other gift of the Holy Spirit that will be of great assistance is the gift of fortitude. "With the Gift of Fortitude, a person is able 'to overcome difficulties or to endure pain and suffering with the strength and power infused by God.'"<sup>3</sup> You do not need for me to tell you that you are bound to face many situations in college that will challenge your Catholic faith. As you work to make a new set of friends, there may be the temptation to compromise on or even abandon some of the moral aspects of our faith. You will need the gift of fortitude to remain firmly grounded in your faith in the face of pressure to act in such a way so as to fit in.

The fear of the Lord is once again helpful, for it instills within us a great love for God, as a father to his child. That love of God will result in a confidence that trusts that whatever the Lord will give you by obeying His will for you will be far better for you than the supposed benefits that come from disobeying Him by giving in to those pressures.

You will also be challenged with many ideas that are contrary to our Catholic faith. Convincing arguments may be made to support those ideas and they can be very attractive, promising an easier way of living Christianity, one that is not so restrained by so many “rules and restrictions.” With the gift of fortitude, you will be able to stand firm in the face of those challenges and not turn away from the beautiful teachings of our Catholic faith. You will be like those disciples of Jesus who were present as He spoke about the Eucharist in Saint John’s Gospel. Many found the teaching hard and decided to depart from Him. Jesus looked to those who remained and asked if they also wanted to leave. Peter, with great fortitude said: “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69).

The gift of fortitude will enable us to experience for ourselves that the teachings of Christ and His Church, when lived faithfully, are the sure and certain path to authentic freedom, peace, and joy, not just in this life, but in the life to come. Another word for fortitude is courage, which comes from the Latin word *cor*, or heart. To be courageous means to be strong of heart.

One of the most effective ways of staying strong of heart and plugged in to these gifts of the Holy Spirit is to stay close to Jesus in the Eucharist. The most important decision that you can make when you graduate is to make a firm commitment to go to Mass every week. It will be hard, to be sure, and your friends may not support you initially in this decision, but I can guarantee that you will not regret making this commitment. As you prepare to receive that gift of His Body and Blood today, ask Him to help you to be intentional in staying close to Him every day, trusting that He will reward you with everything that you need to achieve the one goal in this life that truly matters, graduating at the end of your earthly journey into the communion of saints in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Saunders, Rev. William. "Gifts of the Holy Spirit" *Arlington Catholic Herald*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Psalm 111:10 and Sirach.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*