

CONFIRMATION HOMILY

**St. Aloysius Parishioners
at
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Springfield
December 6, 2015**

**†Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Perhaps in all honesty some of you may felt at least a little bit annoyed when you heard that we would be celebrating the Sacrament of Confirmation at this Mass today since you were not expecting this and now Mass is going to take a little bit longer than you had anticipated. If that is the case, I totally understand, but I hope you will feel differently after I tell you why I will confirming these five girls here today.

This all began with an e-mail message that I received last week from our diocese's Associate Superintendent for Catholic Schools, which I would like to share with you since provides a remarkable insight into the extraordinary character of the Confirmation candidates here from St. Aloysius Parish. In her e-mail the Associate Superintendent wrote as follows:

With the upcoming Confirmation at St. Aloysius next week, I wanted to make you aware of a situation concerning a courageous and brave decision of faith made by some of the candidates.

As you may know, this is the time of year where girls basketball teams are heading into the post season. St. Aloysius' 8th Grade Girls Basketball team is slated to do quite well in this year's regional bracket. During the regular season, the girls had beaten the teams in their regional bracket and were expected to do the same in regionals. Once the brackets and dates were announced, it was discovered that the second round game was scheduled for the same night as Confirmation.

The Principal and Athletic Director, knowing the importance of Confirmation in the lives of young adult Catholics, tried to get the game moved but with no avail. Upon hearing this, a decision had to be made. The school and the coach knew the right decision, but the school also wanted the decision to come from the girls for this situation is exactly the type of decision a Catholic adult would be faced with throughout their lives.

The Interim Principal ... and the Junior High Religion Teacher ... brought the girls together and discussed with them that this is the time to realize how important it is to become an adult in the church and a soldier in Christ. It was also discussed with the girls about making a decision that would support their faith now and in the future, a concept the girls had been discussing during their preparation for Confirmation. After the discussion, it was suggested the girls take a walk around the school to think about their decision. The girls asked if they could go as a group to the new school chapel instead.

Once in the chapel, the girls begin an impromptu prayer service asking for guidance in this situation and for their intentions. Upon leaving the chapel, the girls informed the Principal they had decided they would not be participating in

the regional game so they could participate in their Confirmation. They had also decided, along with the principal, that they would offer up prayers for the other regional players during their Confirmation. . . .

I apologize for the length of this email but this is such a wonderful example of what our schools are about and how we are preparing our students for adulthood in the Catholic Church. I just wanted to let you know the special and courageous decision of faith that these girls made before being Confirmed.

I have shared this e-mail message with all of you because I also wanted to bring to light a hidden example of courageous sacrifice for the faith that would otherwise have remained largely unknown behind the scenes. I also wanted to tell you about this because, in fact, these five girls were not at the Confirmation last Tuesday night at St. Aloysius Parish but instead did play in their regional basketball game after all, so I wanted to explain how that came about as well.

You see, when I received the e-mail from our Associate Superintendent, I was very moved that these young women would make such a mature decision of faith, especially since I love sports myself and I know how significant a playoff game can be. But I was also reminded of the story in the Bible about Abraham being tested by God, who asked

Abraham to sacrifice his own beloved son, Isaac, as a burnt offering to God. Abraham immediately prepares to obey, but at the last moment an angel of the Lord stops the sacrifice, commanding Abraham with these words: "Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do the least thing to him. For I know now that you fear God, since you did not withhold from me your son, your only one" (Genesis 22:12). In the end, God did not require Abraham actually to carry out the sacrifice, since the Lord was satisfied simply knowing that Abraham was willing to put God above everything and everyone else.

Now of course, skipping an 8th grade regional basketball game is not the same magnitude as sacrificing one's son, but it may feel that way to an eighth grader! So just as in the case of Abraham, I thought God would be satisfied knowing that these girls would be willing to make this sacrifice and put God above everything else, so I suggested that the players be allowed to participate in last Tuesday's basketball game and I offered to confirm them this morning instead at this Mass in our Cathedral. I commend these girls on their willingness to offer a meaningful sacrifice to God and provide an extraordinary example of faith for all of us. By the

way, they lost the game last Tuesday night, but perhaps that is another lesson to be learned, that there are some things more important than winning.

Since “sacrifice” and “faith” are at the heart of this story, I would like to say a few words about each.

In popular usage, we tend to think of “sacrifice” as simply giving something up. But it really is much more profound than that. The word “sacrifice” comes from two Latin words, *sacer*, which means, “sacred,” and *facere*, which means, “to make.” So in its truest sense, “sacrifice” means to make something or someone sacred or holy, that is, consecrated to God. The sacrifices that we make as a matter of faith out of love for God in fact make us sacred and holy in the sight of God. The perfect sacrifice was Christ’s death on the cross. By this sacrifice of His only-begotten Son, God the Father showed His love for us, and by His willingness to die on the cross for our sins, Jesus makes us holy and consecrates us to His Father in heaven.¹ The sacrifice of Christ on the cross is commemorated and mysteriously made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Church.² Thus

it is fitting that we celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation in the context of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Believing that bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and believing that the Sacrament of Confirmation completes the grace of Baptism by a special outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit are matters of faith. Faith is a gift from God that invites a response from us by which we assent to the whole truth that God has revealed, the truth that brings a superabundant light as we search for the meaning of life.³

As we go out into a world that is often hostile to religious faith, we must be provided with the spiritual weapons needed for battle with the forces of evil and we must be equipped with a strong suit of armor capable of protecting us. The Apostle Saint Paul describes this suit of armor in the following words: "Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11). The first and foremost weapon in this suit of armor is the shield of faith, as Saint Paul goes on to say: "In all circumstances hold faith up before you as your shield; it will help you extinguish the fiery darts of the evil one. Take the

helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit, the word of God” (Ephesians 6:16-17). Thus we say that Confirmation makes us soldiers of Christ, armed with the spiritual weapons needed for the spiritual battles that wage war upon our souls.

When the devil strives to lead us astray by tempting us to sin, faith shows us a view of the abyss of hell, so that we might behold the torments that will be the punishment of sinners. At the same time, “faith throws open the portals of heaven, where the highest rewards are prepared for those who persevere in the love of God and the pursuit of virtue.”⁴

The reception of the sacrament of Confirmation completes the grace we first received at baptism and strengthens us for the challenges of life. “For by the sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.”⁵

What this is saying is that Confirmation does not mark the completion of your involvement with the Church, but precisely the opposite: Confirmation brings the recipient into full membership in the

Church and thus marks the beginning of your life as a full member of the Church. Being a full member then brings some expectations and responsibilities, namely, to tell other people about your relationship with Jesus Christ, to manifest that relationship in the way you live, and invite other people to share in this faith. Of course, none of this is easy to do, so God gives us the special strength of His Holy Spirit to carry out these duties and responsibilities.

In closing, I would like to sing a song for you. It's called "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)" by Hillsong United.⁶ The lyrics express very well how the Holy Spirit will lead us and strengthen our faith.

You call me out upon the waters
The great unknown, where feet may fail
And there I find You in the mystery
In oceans deep, my faith will stand
...
And I will call upon Your name
And keep my eyes above the waves
When oceans rise
My soul will rest in Your embrace
For I am Yours and You are mine
...

Your grace abounds in deepest waters
Your sovereign hand, will be my guide
Where feet may fail and fear surrounds me
You've never failed and You won't start now

...

So I will call upon Your name
And keep my eyes above the waves
When oceans rise
My soul will rest in Your embrace
For I am Yours and You are mine

...

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders
Let me walk upon the waters
Wherever You would call me
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander
And my faith will be made stronger
In the presence of my Savior

...

I will call upon Your name
Keep my eyes above the waves
My soul will rest in Your embrace
I am Yours and You are mine

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 616.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ## 1357 and 1544.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 26.

⁴ Rev. F. X. Lasance, *The Young Man's Guide: Counsels, Reflections, and Prayers for Catholic Young Men* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1910), 4.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1285.

⁶ Song from the album *Zion*. Writers: Matt Crocker, Joel Houston & Salomon Ligthelm; released September 10, 2013