

Baccalaureate Mass for St. Teresa High School

St. Teresa High School

Monday, May 11, 2015

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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. 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 just a few days, the Church will be celebrating the Solemnity of the Ascension of our Lord. The Ascension is the day on which the Risen Christ parted company with His Apostles and ascended to join His Father in Heaven, ushering in a new era in the life of the Church. In many ways, this event of Jesus' earthly departure provides a fitting parallel for the experience that you are about to have as you prepare to part company with one another for the next phase of your lives. Just as with the Apostles, your lives are about to change in a rather significant way, and so

it can be helpful for us to reflect on this event to see how you should approach this important moment in your lives.

Although the words of Jesus which we hear in the Gospel today were given just before His Passion and death, they apply especially to the experience that the Apostles would have at the time of the Ascension. They were given the wonderful gift of seeing the Risen Christ for forty days after His Resurrection, but now it was time for Him to depart from the earth for good, and He wanted to make sure they were prepared.

Jesus tells the Apostles that even though they will no longer see Him, He will not abandon them. He tells them in today's Gospel that He will send the Advocate to them to be with them, referring to the Holy Spirit who would come upon them ten days later at Pentecost.

He then tells His Apostles: "I have told you this so that you may not fall away" (John 16:1). Jesus knows that the transition to life without His earthly presence will not be easy for them. He warns them here and in other places that they will be persecuted and rejected because of their faith in Christ. He knew that experiencing such resistance could be discouraging and could even cause them to question whether it was worth sticking with the Christian way of life if it meant such a difficult life. And

so He promised to give them the strength to face those challenges by sharing the gift of His Spirit with them, enabling them to not lose heart but be assured of sharing in the victory that He had already won for them.

Jesus comes to you in Word and Sacrament this evening with the same desire that He had for His Apostles, “that you may not fall away.” Of all of the things that you will be taking with you to college or whatever the next step is, your Catholic faith is the most important. At the same time, it is something that is very much at risk of being lost. The statistics vary, but some estimates suggest that as many as 80 percent of students stop practicing their faith at some point during college.¹ That is an alarming statistic, and one that should not be passed over lightly.

Many of the structures that have kept you involved in your Catholic faith for the past several years are about to change or even disappear. For some of you, it has been your time here at this Catholic high school that has kept you connected to your faith. Even if you go to a Catholic college or university, your participation in the religious practices will be optional and not worked into your daily schedule. For others, it has been your family, bringing you to Mass every Sunday. Once again, even though Mass will be available to you at college, your attendance is up to you.

To many young people, this change is one that they see as positive, for they get to finally have the so-called freedom to choose for themselves whether or not they want to practice their faith. If your Catholic faith is not a priority going into college, it will be very easy to be distracted by the many other worldly things that can work to pull you away from your faith to the point that you may even “fall away” like so many before you.

The same promise of the Holy Spirit that Jesus gave to the Apostles at the beginning of the Church is given to you as well. Jesus greatly desires to share the gift of His life and His love with you so that you will remain firm in your faith during these challenging times. But, He will not force Himself into your life. Just as with the Apostles, He asks that you be open to cooperating with His grace so that you can be guided by Him. This means that you have to make an intentional commitment to staying close to Him, not just at the beginning of the next phase of your life, but renewing that commitment each and every day.

In this regard, one of the most beneficial things that you can do to get started on the right foot is to seek out the local Catholic campus ministry and go to Mass the first Sunday that you are at school. Then, make that commitment to come back the following week, and indeed, every week so

that you remain united to Christ and His love in the Eucharist. In addition to that, it would be a good idea to make use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation at least once a semester, and more often as needed, to remove any obstacles that sin may introduce into your living out of your faith.

On the surface, such advice sounds rather simple, but in reality, you will find that it is not so easy. As I mentioned, there will be no shortage of new influences and opportunities that will be a source of struggle for you as you seek to maintain your faith. There will be people who will try to tell you that what the Church teaches is out-of-date, or somehow closed to true human freedom and progress. In an effort to fit in or have some fun, you may be tempted or pressured to do things that go against your Catholic faith. How will you respond in those moments? Will you remain strong in your faith, or will you give in and give up your faith?

Although the context is different, your situation is not all that far off from the experience of those first disciples. They faced incredible pressure from the world around them and they knew that if they had any hope of being successful in repelling those temptations, they needed God's grace to aid them, and the Lord was not stingy in providing for all that they needed

in order to remain faithful to Him. Nor will He be stingy with you in providing you all of the help that you will need to imitate the fidelity of the saints.

Living your life according to your faith does not mean that you have to sacrifice happiness and pleasure, although that is the message that the world tries to convey about the Catholic Church and her teachings. Jesus told His disciples: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Following Jesus and His teachings, as expressed in the Scriptures and the official teachings of the Church, brings us *abundance* of life! Only He can truly satisfy the longings in our heart for true joy and peace. Everything else, even though they may bring temporary happiness and pleasure, will fade away and leave us wanting more, resulting in our being farther from the true life of Christ. True, following Christ is going to be hard, but the benefits are absolutely worth the effort.

There is a good quote that summarizes the dynamic of this situation. It comes from a famous Catholic author of the early 20th century by the name of G.K. Chesterton. He said that "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."² Let

us not fear the difficulty of living our faith as we move forward, whatever that next step may be. Rather, try living that faith intentionally each day and experience for yourself that it is indeed not found wanting in any way. Instead, you will see that living according to your Catholic faith is not just another possible way to live your life, but that it is the *only* way to live your life, for it is the way that brings true joy and true fulfillment not just in this life, but in the life to come in Heaven.

In terms of resisting the challenges to your faith that will inevitably come your way, there is an excellent movie that came out a few months ago called, "God's Not Dead." It tells the story of a young Christian who takes a philosophy course in college. The professor is an atheist and asks all of his students to sign a paper saying, "God is dead." In a class of about 100 students, all of them sign except for one. The professor says if he won't sign the paper, the student would have to get up in front of the class and prove to them that God is not dead. I won't tell you how it turns out, in case you haven't seen the movie yet, but it does cause each one of us to ask ourselves what we would do in that situation: take the easy way out, avoid confrontation and sign the paper, or stand up for your Catholic faith and your belief in God.

Now, in real life, the challenges will probably not be so overt or in-your-face” as in a Hollywood movie. You probably won’t have somebody coming up to you asking you to sign a piece of paper declaring that you are an atheist! The challenges will be much more subtle, perhaps even from your friends. For example, you’re in college, it’s Sunday and you’re planning to go to Mass, and your friends invite you to go with them to a movie, but you say you can’t go because you have other plans. Your friends ask you what you’re planning to do and you say you’re going to Mass. They ask, “You’re doing what?” You respond, “Yes, I’m Catholic and I go to Mass on Sunday because I want to receive Christ into my heart!” Then, take it a step further: invite them to come with you to Mass! That’s what we call “evangelization” - inviting others to share in the Good News of God’s love!

The movie includes an appearance by a Christian music group called “The Newsboys,” in which they sing the title song, “God’s not Dead.” The lyrics of the refrain are easy to pick up, so I’ll sing them a couple of times and then ask you to sing with me:

My God's not dead

He's surely alive

He's living on the inside

Roaring like a lion

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Newman Connection, <http://www.newmanconnection.com/>.

² G.K Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, Part I, Chapter 5.