

**Baccalaureate Mass for St. Anthony High School
Saturday, May 21, 2016
Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity**

**St. Anthony of Padua Parish
Effingham, IL**

**† 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 good that we are here to celebrate this Baccalaureate Mass in conjunction with the graduation of the senior class of St. Anthony 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.

This year marks the 35th Anniversary of the release of one of my favorite movies and one of the most inspiring sports films ever made. The movie is titled *Chariots of Fire*, which tells the story of Eric Liddell. He was known as the “Flying Scotsman” and he was the projected winner of the men’s 100 meters race at the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris. But when Eric Liddell discovered that the trial runs were scheduled for a Sunday morning, he bowed out of the race. Even the Prince of Wales could not

persuade him to honor his country by running on the Sabbath. Liddell explained his decision, saying, “God my King is greater than the kings of England, Wales and Scotland. To honor God is more important than to honor the king of England.”

Born in China to Scottish missionary parents, Eric Liddell returned to the land of his birth to spend his life as a Christian missionary because he felt driven to share the joy of honoring God. He lived and worked there for twenty years, devoting his life to spreading the love of God, which he had found in Jesus, everywhere he went.

Liddell described his own life as a “complete surrender” to God, and here is a key for helping us to understand what love means and what love asks of us. We cannot all be fast runners like Liddell, but we can learn the love of God, as he did, as a great gift from God.

I share the story of Eric Liddell with you because I believe it offers some helpful points of reflection for you as you prepare to make this transition away from high school.

Take, for example, the courage with which he decided to stick to his Christian principles. He knew right from wrong. He also knew that choosing what was right was not always going to be popular and that it

was not always going to be easy. But he was convinced that sticking to those principles, not compromising on them in the least, was the very best course that he could take, and that God would bless him for that fidelity.

This was made clear to him in a very powerful way at those same Olympics. Since he chose not to run in the 100 meters race, he decided to enter the 400 meters race. The odds were definitely not in his favor, but he did it anyway. The story goes that when it was time to run the race, he was assigned to the worst lane. But he was encouraged by a note that the team trainer had given to him that morning. The note, which he kept in his pocket, read: “[God] will honor those who honor Him” (1 Samuel 2:30). Eric Liddell went on to win the gold medal in the men’s 400 meters.

Your time here at St. Anthony High School has afforded you a wonderful gift in your Catholic faith. You have learned about what is right and what is wrong. Learning that material is the easy part. Living it is where it gets hard. Like Eric Liddell, you are encouraged to see that by honoring God, doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong, God will in turn bless you for your fidelity to His will for you.

This is a difficult proposition to accept, and one that is often quickly dismissed as mere pious talk, especially among young people. We hear

these words of direction, but we often question how true they are. After all, we see many people who choose not to follow those principles of the Catholic faith, and they seem to be doing just fine, and in many cases, they seem to be prospering, enjoying life to the fullest. We also see those who have made the decision to stick to their faith, yet things do not seem to be going their way, and they seem miserable. The serious question arises in our hearts whether it is worth the risk of missing out on so many things in life by letting ourselves seemingly be constrained by the rules and regulations that our Catholic faith imposes upon us.

To respond to this very real question that you may ask, if you have not done so already, I would like to direct our attention to the mystery of the Holy Trinity, which we celebrate at this Mass. Tackling the Trinity can be intimidating, because it is such a complex mystery, one that is impossible truly to understand.

There is a story about St. Augustine, one of the greatest theologians the Church has ever known. He was walking along the seashore when he noticed a little boy bringing seashells filled with water from the ocean to a little hole that he had dug. St. Augustine asked the boy what he was doing, to which the boy responded that he was going to pour the entire sea into

the hole. St. Augustine told the boy that such a task was impossible. The boy then looked at this great theologian and told him: “It is no more impossible than what *you* are trying to do – comprehend the immensity of the mystery of the Holy Trinity with your small intelligence.”

While we will never come close to understanding the Trinity, that is not what is important. There is only one thing that we really need to know about the Trinity, and we get that from St. John the Apostle. He explains very clearly, that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). God, as a Trinity, is a perfect relationship of love. Father and Son are perfectly united with one another in the bond of love that is the Holy Spirit.

You might be wondering how speaking of this intimate relationship between the three persons of the Trinity has anything to do with answering the question as to why we should take the living of our Catholic faith seriously? To put it more bluntly – how does this idea of the Trinity answer the question “what’s in it for me?”

The answer is this: while God has everything that He needs in Himself through that bond of love, He has a desire to share that love with us. In our first reading from the Book of Proverbs, we hear about the work of creation by God. Notice how it is spoken of in the plural, not the

singular, thus indicating the work of the Triune God. At the end of this reading, we hear the following: "I found delight in the human race" (Proverbs 8:31). The human race is the very pinnacle of God's creation, so much so that He has created us in His very image. As a result of that, He desires to share with us what He Himself has, that infinite gift of love.

This love was made available to our first parents, but it was not forced upon them. They made the decision not to accept this gift, and so they found themselves outside of the Garden of Eden, symbolizing being outside of that union of love that exists in God.

Not having any need for humanity, it would have been no problem for God to just give up on us while He continued to enjoy that gift of perfect love. But, that love would not give up on us, and so the Father sent His Son into the world, all the while remaining united to the Father through the love that is the Holy Spirit. He became one of us and then offered His very life as a sacrifice so that we might have the door reopened to welcome us back into that love that He intended for us from the beginning of creation.

In the Gospel for today, we hear Jesus offering His final words to His disciples before He heads off to suffer His Passion and death on the Cross.

He reminds them that the “Spirit of truth” (John 16:13) would come back to them after His departure. That gift of the Holy Spirit, which we just celebrated last Sunday on the Solemnity of Pentecost, is the gift that draws us into a participation in that love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is a gift that we do not have to wait for Heaven to enjoy; we can already experience the peace, joy, and fulfillment of that love in our lives while here on earth.

As with our first parents, God will not force this love upon us. It is something that we have the freedom to choose or reject. To choose to accept this love is to choose to keep His commandments, for as Jesus Himself says: “Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me” (John 14:21) and “[w]hoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him” (John 14:23).

We have to be convinced, just as was Eric Liddell, that to keep the commandments, to live according to our Catholic faith, will keep us in His love and that there is absolutely nothing more important or more treasured than that. This is what the saints in Heaven banked on while they were here on earth, and now they enjoy a happiness and peace in Heaven that is

so far beyond our imagining. This is what each of you is being invited to stake your life on as you take this important step in your life.

In the movie, *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell speaks a very memorable line. It is also an inspiring line, so I have it taped next to my bathroom mirror to inspire me when I look at it. Eric Liddell tells his sister, "I believe that God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. When I run, I feel God's pleasure." We feel that same pleasure when we fulfill the purpose for which God made us.

He has given each of you many gifts, and I have no doubt that you can and will do remarkable things with those gifts. But never forget that the most important gift that you have is your faith. God has made you in order to use that gift every day of your life. I can guarantee that if you make the commitment to live that gift, no matter what you do, you will be filled with an immense sense of hope that the Lord will indeed bless you for your faithfulness. As St. Paul reminds us, this "hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5).

May God give us this grace. Amen.