

**Homily for Easter Vigil Mass
March 26, 2016**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“March Madness,” is the phrase used to describe the National Collegiate Basketball Association’s annual championship tournament. It is a single-elimination tournament that starts with 68 teams in the month of March. The last team to emerge victorious is recognized nationally as the best team in college basketball. Similar tournaments are also taking place locally during this time of year at the high school and grade school levels.

A few weeks ago I was scheduled to celebrate a Confirmation Mass at a parish in our diocese and was informed the week before that the second round 8th grade girls basketball game was scheduled for the same night as Confirmation. Efforts to get the game changed to another date were unsuccessful, so the Principal and the Junior High Religion Teacher brought the girls together and discussed with them 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 began 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.

I am sharing this story with all of you because I 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 that night, 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 heard about the girls' decision, 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 that we heard earlier this evening from the Book of Genesis 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 the players be allowed to participate in the basketball game and I offered to confirm them at another time, which I did the following Sunday morning at the ten o'clock Mass at our Cathedral in Springfield. 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

that 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, which we commemorated yesterday on Good Friday. 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 Initiation 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 we are fully initiated into the Body of Christ, which is the Church, through the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, 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 from his Letter to the Ephesians: “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

One of the biggest challenges in our secular world is the temptation not to practice the faith. If you give in to that temptation, you will be paying a heavy price. Imagine that you have studied and worked hard to get into a very elite college or top-tier university. Then, when you receive the letter notifying you that you have been admitted to this prestigious institution, you never attend any classes. What a waste that would be! Similarly, those of you being fully initiated into the Church tonight have studied and worked hard to become full members of the Catholic Church. If you stop going to church after this celebration of the Easter Vigil, you will squander not only all your preparation for your adult life as a Christian, but you will be rejecting a great gift that God has given to you. "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 your reception of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist does not mark the completion of your involvement with the Church, but precisely the opposite: this liturgy tonight is not a “graduation” but an initiation or beginning that brings the recipient into full membership in 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.

This beautiful liturgy of the Easter Vigil is a gift given to all of us by the Church each year to renew our hope and encourage us to persevere in moving forward on our path of discipleship. The Old Testament readings paint a picture of God’s loving care for His people throughout history. Even though our ancestors strayed away from that love on many occasions, God would not give up on the people He had chosen to be His own.

Tonight's Gospel from Saint Luke tells how the women who found the tomb of Jesus empty ran to tell the apostles. We are told that the women's story seemed like nonsense, and so the apostles did not believe them. "But Peter got up and ran to the tomb, bent down, and saw the burial cloths alone; then he went home amazed at what had happened."

Although Peter was amazed by what he saw, amazement does not count as faith. Eventually Peter and the other apostles, even the "Doubting Thomas," would come to believe in the Risen Christ, and that belief changed their lives. We might ask ourselves: are we only amazed at this story of the resurrection? Are we only amazed at the doctrine that the consecrated bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist? Or does our response go deeper than mere amazement? Amazement, after all, does not count as faith; faith is something altogether different. Faith is what makes us holy – and saves us. Now that is amazing!

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.