

**Homily for the Sports Faith Hall of Fame Mass
Vigil of the Solemnity of Pentecost
St. Mary Church, Lake Forest, Illinois**

May 14, 2016

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

A few weeks ago I was scheduled to celebrate a Confirmation Mass at a parish in our diocese and was informed the week before the Confirmation 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 basketball 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 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. 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

Believing that bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is a matter of faith. So too is believing that the Apostles received the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and that we received a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit when we received the Sacrament of Confirmation.

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 in 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

The reception of the sacrament of Confirmation completes the grace we first received at baptism and strengthens us for the challenges of life. 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, if you stop going to church, you will squander not only all those years of 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 Baptism and Confirmation brought you 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.

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 in the presence of our Savior.

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