

**Homily Outline for Graduation Mass at
St. John's Catholic Newman Center
University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana**

**The Fourth Sunday of Easter - Year C
May 11-12, 2019**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

- I. It is good to be with you as you celebrate the Graduation of the students here at St. John's Catholic Newman Center University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana.

- II. Looking at the signs of our times, the burning of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris last month has been very much on my mind.
 - A. Many people who have never been to Paris are familiar with Notre Dame Cathedral thanks to Bishop Robert Barron's *Catholicism* series.
 - B. Thirty years ago then-Father Robert Barron gave me a personal tour of Notre Dame Cathedral, so it is heartbreaking to see the damage done by the fire.
 - C. I am confident that Notre Dame Cathedral will be rebuilt.
 1. Experience of growing up in Chicago with a keen awareness of how the city was rebuilt from the ashes of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.
 - a) Prayer of Fr. Arnold Damen to spare Holy Family Church; in gratitude, Chicago named a street after him: Damen Avenue!
 - b) Grant Park was built with debris from the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.
 2. Almost a billion dollars have already been pledged for the rebuilding of Notre Dame Cathedral.
 - D. Silver lining is that rebuilding Notre Dame Cathedral may help rebuild the community of faith in France; it is not just a museum from the past.

- III. Mindful of St. Francis of Assisi's experience at the church of San Damiano.
 - A. He heard the Lord's message to "rebuild my Church," not just the physical structure, but the community of the Church as well.
 - B. In light of recent scandals and shocking revelations of the sins of priests and the hierarchy, we are called not just to rebuild Notre Dame Cathedral, but the community of faith in Paris, throughout France, in the United States and across the world.

- IV. Blueprint for rebuilding the Church can be seen in the Scriptures for Holy Week
 - A. The reading of the Lord's Passion from the Gospel of St. Luke starts with the narrative of the Last Supper.
 1. Jesus says one of His apostles will betray Him; another will deny Him.

2. St. Luke tells us that an argument about who was the greatest broke out among them while they were eating. This was during the first celebrated Mass with Jesus the High Priest and his hand-picked bishops!
3. After the Last Supper was finished, Jesus took them out to pray with Him, but they fell asleep!
4. The Gospel readings for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week are all about Judas: his plotting to betray Jesus; bargaining with the high priests for a sum of money for his betrayal; and objecting to spending money on perfumed oil for Jesus' feet, not because he was concerned for the poor, but because he was a thief (and this was Jesus' hand-picked treasurer).

B. What do we learn from all this?

1. Judas recognizes his sin, but does not believe he can be forgiven, so he kills himself.
2. Peter recognizes his sin, and weeps bitterly.
3. My brothers and sisters in Christ, when we see our sins we should weep bitterly and not fall into some kind of rationalization or complacency about them. We should weep bitterly that we will never commit those sins again. And that is the real story of Holy Week. Because those weak, sinful, frail men on whom Jesus would build His church, at the beginning of all this, that passion narrative, are so seemingly unsuited for the task. After Jesus rises from the dead and He gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit, they are completely different; they are completely changed, and they are alive and on fire with the spirit and they go out and change the world by proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

V. What does this have to do with Graduation?

- A. During your years in college you have acquired many skills, assets and resources, e.g., knowledge, life experience, social skills, interpersonal relationships and friendships.
- B. The most important asset is one that not every graduate leaves college with, namely, **faith**.
- C. So if you are graduated with your faith intact, or better, even stronger than when you first arrived here, so will be better off for the rest of your life!

VI. Why is faith so important?

- A. This story from Friday's *Chicago Tribune* puts the issue of faith into perspective:
- B. Journalist Stephen J. Lyons wrote a commentary entitled, "Grieving over Mom: No, she's not in a 'better place.'"¹
- C. He wrote that, after his mother died, "some friends, relatives and acquaintances kindly reached out to assure me: 'Mom was in a better place.' 'After all, she was not going to get better.' 'It must be a relief.'
- D. Reflected on this, Lyons wrote that (and I quote him now)

this idea of a 'better place' did not exactly comfort me, because being alive remains the best place ever.

Let's review the facts: Mom is dead. Nothing will change that, even though for the past month I keep expecting her to call me. I wake up at night and think I need to be doing something for her. Then I remember that Mom is no longer here, on this planet, at this time. I cannot begin to describe how weird that feels.

"A better place" is not a crematorium or pricey casket stuck in the ground. A better place is Mom in her 30s, at the height of her physical beauty and capability. . . .

A better place is when Mom bought me my first guitar from Sears; when she tried to hit me fly balls in a vacant lot; when she took me out for hamburgers and fries on payday at Chicago's majestic Windermere Hotel; and when she kept me home from school so we could watch the funeral of her hero Martin Luther King Jr. There are no better places than these.

After some time, Mom's ashes arrived. They are whitish-gray, heavier than expected and sealed with a round metal clip with the number 5869. Is this the better place? Hardly, but it's a comfort to think that some part of her is here with me. And that among those remains and the memories they will trigger is a path forward through this crushing grief.

- VII. As I read this, I thought, "How sad; he thinks all that is left of his mother are some ashes in an urn.
- A. There is no mention of belief in an afterlife, hope for heaven or eternal life.
 - B. All of this strikes home for me as my mother died this past March 13.
 - C. Many people expressed their belief and their hope that Mom is now "in a better place."
 1. Mom lived in a nursing home for the past four years with declining health, with loss of physical strength and her memory.
 2. People of faith indeed have hope for "a better place."
- VIII. In today's Gospel for this Fourth Sunday of Easter we have the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (John 10:27-30).
- A. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish."
 - B. This is the message that lifts us from grief and gives us hope.
 - C. This is why our faith is so important.

I would like to close this homily by singing a song for you. It's called "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)" by Hillsong United.² The lyrics express my hope and my prayer for the graduates here, that Holy Spirit will lead you as you go forth and strengthen your 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 <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-mothers-day-death-loss-better-place-20190509-story.html>

² Song from the album *Zion*. Writers: Matt Crocker, Joel Houston & Salomon Ligthelm; released September 10, 2013