

**CONFIRMATION HOMILY
2018-2019**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As you may know, I live right here in Springfield at the Cathedral Rectory next door to our Cathedral Church, the mother church of our diocese. Both our Cathedral and our diocese are dedicated to our Blessed Mother under her title as the Immaculate Conception. The title “Immaculate Conception” expresses the teaching of the Catholic Church that the Blessed Virgin Mary was conceived without sin. One of the happy consequences of the Blessed Virgin Mary’s Immaculate Conception is that she did not die in the same way that every other human being does, but was assumed body and soul into heaven by the power of God. This mystery of Mary’s Assumption helps us to understand a very profound truth about Confirmation.

We can get a better understanding of this truth by contrasting the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary with the Ascension of Our Lord Jesus. “Assumption” and “Ascension”: two very similar words with two

very distinct meanings. When we talk about Our Lord's Ascension, we are saying that He ascended into heaven under His own power because, as the Son of God, He certainly had the ability to go up to heaven under His own power. In contrast, we talk about the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary because Mary was assumed or taken up into heaven by the power of God. She could not do that on her own.

In this regard, we are more like Mary than Jesus. We are not God like Jesus, so we cannot get to heaven by our own efforts. We need God's grace to get to heaven. In fact, we are weaker than Mary, because she was full of grace, as Saint Gabriel proclaimed to her at the Annunciation when the Archangel announced that Mary would be the Mother of our Savior. If Mary needed God's help to be assumed body and soul into heaven, how much more do we need God's grace to get to heaven?

The connection of this truth to our understanding of what happens in the Sacrament of Confirmation concerns the fact that, in recent years, the tendency has been to put the emphasis on what the candidates are doing in the Sacrament of Confirmation, as if they are the ones doing the confirming. The truth is that the primary action of all the sacraments is initiated by God,

not by us. Yes, we have to accept God's grace and cooperate with it, but we cannot somehow manufacture God's grace on our own. God takes the first step by offering us His grace as a freely conferred gift. Our action is one of response to this gift, accepting God's grace with humble and grateful hearts. In the Sacrament of Confirmation, the bishop is the mediator of this grace, administering the sacrament and confirming that the candidate is now fully initiated into the Church.

It is often said that Mary is the model Christian because she shows us how to respond to the gifts offered by her Son, Jesus. We should look to Mary, therefore, to imitate her example of how to be a good disciple—a true follower of Christ. Mary is the great example of how we are to respond to God.

Mary always responded by turning to God in prayer. At the wedding feast in Cana, she prayed by asking Jesus to help the wedding party when they ran out of wine, which, of course, He did.

Mary always responded with trust and faith. As her cousin Elizabeth said of Mary, she believed that what God had spoken to her would be fulfilled!

Mary always responded by doing what she could. She went looking for Jesus when he had disappeared as a twelve-year old boy, instead of sitting helplessly and worrying, and she found Him in the Temple.

Mary responded as part of the community of the Church. She accepted an important place in the community with John at the foot of the cross. After the crucifixion, she was with the disciples in the Upper Room where they had eaten the Last Supper with Jesus.

In a sense, it may be said that every feast day of Mary is also a reminder of how God works in all of our lives.

In the Immaculate Conception, we learn, as Mary did, that God will never ask us to do anything without having prepared us to be able to say "yes."

In the Annunciation, we learn, as Mary did, that God will also respect our free will. As St. Francis of Assisi wrote, "God begged flesh from the Blessed Mother in order to become one of us." She could have said "no" to God, but Mary said "yes" and opened the doors of our salvation.

At the Nativity of Our Lord, we learn, as Mary did, that God will always be with us, no matter how dire the circumstances.

Finally, in her Assumption, we learn, as Mary did, that our destiny, our true home, is with God in heaven.

In advance of your Confirmation today, I sent some questionnaires to our candidates asking what receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation means to them. I am going to read some of their responses anonymously, so you can all get a sampling of what the Sacrament of Confirmation means to our candidates and how they plan to live out their Confirmation commitment.

[Read from questionnaires.]

I thank you for these personal professions of faith and I pray that you will always remain as strong in your faith for the rest of your lives as you are expressing here today. Ultimately, our response to the gift of God's grace is the response of faith. Right after this homily, I will ask our Confirmation candidates to stand and renew their baptismal promises. They will do that by responding "I do" to a series of questions that I will pose to them about their faith. Before doing so, we should review: what do we believe?

First, we reject Satan, and all his empty promises. This is a crucial first step since the Devil will try to prevent us from reaching our goal of receiving God's grace and living forever with God in heaven.

Next, we express our belief in the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is how we were baptized: one God, but three persons, united in relationship to each other in a divine community of love:

We believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth.

We believe in God the Son. Jesus is our Lord, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, died, buried, rose from the dead, now seated at the right hand of the Father.

We believe in the God the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, who came upon the apostles at Pentecost and today is given to you sacramentally in Confirmation. St. Augustine described the Holy Spirit as the “bond of love” and “communion” between Father and Son. God does not live or act in solitude.

We believe that the Church is holy and catholic, that is, it contains the fullness of the truth and extends to everyone throughout the world: we share in the divine community of love.

We believe in the communion of saints. We are all called to be saints in the holiness of our lives here on earth so that we can be saints for all eternity in heaven.

We believe in the forgiveness of sins, made possible by our Lord's suffering and death as a gift freely bestowed upon us. In response to this gift, we are asked to repent our sins and live as Christ taught us to live.

We believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. This refers to all of us, not just Jesus. When we die, we will not exist for all eternity simply as spirits. We believe that Christ will come again and raise up our mortal bodies to a glorified form like His for all eternity.

This creed, this statement of our beliefs as Christians, has been put into song by a Christian band called the Newsboys. The title of the song, appropriately enough, is simply, "We believe," and it goes like this:

In this time of desperation
When all we know is doubt and fear
There is only one foundation
We believe, we believe

[Refrain:]

We believe in God the Father
We believe in Jesus Christ
We believe in the Holy Spirit
And He's given us new life
We believe in the crucifixion
We believe that He conquered death

We believe in the resurrection
And He's comin' back again, we believe

In this broken generation
When all is dark, You help us see
There is only one salvation
We believe, we believe [repeat refrain]

May God give us this grace. Amen.