

**Baccalaureate Mass for St. Anthony High School
Saturday, May 31, 2014
Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord**

**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 to be with you this evening 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.

In 1994, a few years before all of you graduates were born, actor Tom Hanks starred in one the most popular movies in recent decades, *Forrest Gump*. As I am sure you know, the movie recounts various details from the extraordinary life of a man from Alabama, a life which included witnessing several defining moments of the latter half of the twentieth century.

As an avid runner, one of my favorite scenes from the movie is when Forrest recounts the time of his life during which he ran across the country

multiple times. At first, he was alone in his trek, but others would eventually join him. As he was telling the story, he said: “for some reason what I was doing seemed to make sense to people.” More and more people came to follow him, obviously inspired by the example that he was setting. He said that somebody had told him later that his running had given people hope.

After more than three years of running, Forrest decided to stop and go home. The scene at the point in the movie shows him turning around in the middle of the desert and walking through the crowd of people who had been following him in his run. After a few moments of silence, a man from the crowd cried out in obvious frustration: “Now what are we supposed to do?” Many of them had dedicated all of their time and energy into following him and it had come to an abrupt end.

Although it is not a perfect depiction, I think this scene from *Forrest Gump* is in some ways similar to the experience of the Apostles on the day that Christ ascended into Heaven. They had spent the previous three years following Him, learning from Him, and witnessing His many miracles. Now He was leaving them. The account from our first reading says that “they were looking intently at the sky as he was going” (Acts 1:10). The

scriptures do not say anything about what they thought or what they may have said during those moments as they looked up. I do not think it would be out of the question to suggest that one or more of the Apostles may have asked the same question that the man asked when Forrest Gump ended his long run: "Now what are we supposed to do?"

This very same question may be one that each of you has been thinking about at this time in your life. Graduating from high school brings with it, in many cases, some very significant changes. For all of you, it will mean leaving this comfortable setting which has been your home, day in and day out, for the past four years. Whether you are happy about this or not, all of you will be confronted with a new environment and a new structure to your life. Many of you will be moving away from home to pursue further education in college. This will bring with it no shortage of new opportunities which will require adjustment. It is quite natural, then, for you to ask: "Now what are we supposed to do?"

The answer to that question depends on which voice to which you choose to listen. On the one hand, there are the voices that come from the world which say things such as: "Live it up," "You are finally free to do what you want," "Experience as much as you can," "Do whatever it takes

to be successful," "Take care of number one," and "Have it your way," just to name a few. These voices are very alluring to us as they promise to bring happiness, excitement, fun, power, and pleasure. In the end, however, those who follow such voices with all of their energy often find themselves on a dead-end path, discovering that what seemed to be so attractive was actually quite shallow and destructive.

There is, on the other hand, the voice of the Good Shepherd, Christ Himself, as He speaks to us in the Scriptures and through His Church. As the Apostles were looking up to the sky, two angels came to interrupt their daydreaming and set them on their way. The voice that they would have remembered would have been that of Jesus as He imparted His final instructions to them: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

It is this same voice and these same words spoken by Jesus at the Ascension that are being spoken to all of you here tonight. It is His voice which offers the true answer to that question about what should be done next in your lives. It is no coincidence, I believe, that these words we hear

from the Gospel tonight at your graduation were the very words that served as the theme for last summer's World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro. At the closing Mass on Copacabana Beach, Pope Francis reminded the young people that this command from the Lord was not meant just for the Apostles, but "a command that the Lord entrusts to the whole Church, and that includes you."¹

Responding to this command does not mean that you have to sacrifice your plans and dreams for the future . It does, however, mean that you pursue those plans and dreams within the context of your faith. To some, the suggestion of this seems to be an imposition on their freedom to achieve their goals. In actuality, the contrary is true. By living our lives guided by the principles of our faith, we not only achieve our goals in an ethical and responsible way, we also provide an example for others, that by following the path of the Gospel, one can be successful and happy, something that the voice of the world would suggest is not possible.

In a society that has become more materialistic and less focused on God, there is a great need for young people to take up the banner of Jesus Christ and His Gospel, proclaiming by word and deed that it is indeed good to be a follower of Christ. You have been given a great gift in your

Catholic education received here at St. Anthony High School. This education has given you the tools to be the disciples that the Lord desires in order to be the instruments of change in a world that is constantly in need of conversion. This priceless gift of your Catholic faith is one that will serve you better than any other and which will, in fact, help you to use your other gifts in the way that God desires them to be used, not for your own glory, but for His and for the benefit of others.

The question that I encourage each of you to consider tonight is this: Which voice are you listening to in your life as you come to this important point in your journey? Is it the voice of the world which says: "I'm finally finished with Catholic school, now I can live a life of freedom. I can do what I want, when I want, and how I want"? Or, is it the voice of the Good Shepherd who is inviting you to follow Him, trusting that by being obedient to Him and His Church, you lose absolutely nothing, but stand to gain the one thing that truly matters, eternal life in Heaven? Do not be afraid to set out on this path, for you will never be alone if you remain on it, for as Jesus promised: "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

I pray that you will always listen to the voice of Christ and remain close to Him and His Church. Your Catholic education here at St. Anthony's has given you a good start by setting you on the right path. For this, we give profound gratitude to God. As we continue our celebration of the Eucharist, pray that the Lord who has begun this good work in you will assist you in the years ahead to continue along that path, confident that by following Him, He will provide you with the wisdom and guidance to resist those voices which promise so much, but in the end only lead to emptiness. By always following the voice of the Good Shepherd, you will come to experience the abundance of life He promises, not only here, but forever in Heaven to where we all hope to graduate and be awarded with the title of saints of God, sharing eternal happiness with Him and one another.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Holy Mass for the 28th World Youth Day*, 28 July 2013.