

Homily for the Baccalaureate Mass for St. Teresa High School

**St. Teresa High School
Decatur, Illinois
Monday, May 10, 2021**

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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 today to celebrate this Baccalaureate Mass in conjunction with the graduation of the senior class of St. Teresa High School.

In an article in the past weekend's issue of WSJ, titled, "'Follow Your Dreams' and Other Terrible Career Advice," the author Bonnie Hammer says, "'Follow your dreams' is the exhortation of many college commencement speeches, but it is nightmare job advice. Americans are already raised on a diet high in dreams, from fairy tales to superheroes. . . . The larger truth is that professional dreams can be incredibly limiting, particularly at the start of our work lives. When we enter the workplace convinced that we already know what we want to do in a specific field and are committed to it at all costs, we're saying, in essence, that there is very little left for us to learn, discover or be curious about. That nothing else could

make us happy or fulfilled. But we can't dream what we don't know, and the world of 'I don't know' is expanding." So her advice is: "While we are all born with personal worth, we have to earn our professional worth. No matter your academic record, the summer internships you've held or even your last job, when we step into a new workplace, we start fresh. And when our careers are beginning, that often means doing the menial labor, the unsexy assignments and the mindless tasks we might feel are beneath us. But someone has to do them. Why wouldn't it be us? On the job, people will only know our worth once they know our work. That takes time, effort and consistency. It's not based on potential or promise but on results. . . . If you want someone to care about you at work, care about them first. The best way to have your opinions heard? Prove by your actions and accomplishments that you are someone worth listening to. Looking back, I was only able to work my way up to the top because I started at the very, very bottom."¹ So if you want to make a strong professional start, be open to every opportunity and embrace the lowliest tasks. For example, I have a high school classmate who got a job as manager of the suggestion box at a hospital and worked his way up to become the President and CEO of the hospital!

So today I won't tell you to "follow your dreams," but I will tell you that success is usually the result of hard work. But we also need to realize that we cannot succeed on our own without God grace, so look to God for help.

Many of you will go to college before you enter the workforce, but the lessons you learned here at St. Teresa Catholic High School and will continue to learn will help you later in life. To quote a phrase I learned on the first day of class in my freshman high school Latin class: *non pro schola, sed pro vita*, which means, "not for school, but for life." In other words, our classwork is not just for grades and a diploma, but to learn lessons to help us in life.

Today is also a special occasion for me personally as I celebrate my 62nd anniversary of my First Holy Communion today. Tomorrow will be the 60th anniversary of my receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation. This Friday will be the 46th anniversary of my ordination as a priest! So, with gratitude for the many blessings that the Lord has bestowed upon these students over the past four years as well as upon my priestly ministry for the past forty-six years, we come to the altar to offer our greatest form of thanksgiving to Him in the celebration of the Eucharist.

If you are Catholic, I invite you to think back to your First Holy Communion and Confirmation. If you are not Catholic but were baptized Christian, I invite you to think back to the day of your baptism, because it is on that day that you were adopted as a child of God and received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“We live surrounded by God's gifts. Everything we have that is good, all our spiritual and bodily qualities, and countless other gifts, all of them are God’s gifts to make us happy in this life and to enable us reach Heaven safely. But it was first and foremost in Baptism that our Father God filled us with innumerable gifts. He erased the stain of original sin from our soul. He enriched us with the gift of sanctifying grace, by which he made us sharers in his own divine life, and he made us his sons and daughters. He also made us members of the Church.”²

There are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. “The gift of understanding shows us the riches of the Faith with greater clarity. The gift of knowledge enables us to judge created things in an upright manner, and to keep our heart fixed on God, and on things insofar as they lead us to him.

The gift of wisdom enables us to comprehend the unfathomable wonder of God, and it urges us to seek him in preference to all other things, amid our ordinary work and obligations. The gift of counsel points out the paths of holiness to us - God's Will in our ordinary daily life - and encourages us to choose the option which most closely coincides with the glory of God, and the good of our fellow man. The gift of piety inclines us to treat God with the intimacy with which a child treats his father. The gift of fortitude uplifts us continually, helping us to overcome the difficulties which we inevitably meet on our journey to God. The gift of fear induces us to flee the occasions of sin, resist temptation, avoid every evil which could sadden the Holy Spirit, and to fear above all the loss of the One whom we love, and who is the reason of being of our life.”³

“Along with grace, God adorned our soul with the supernatural virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The virtues give us the power or capacity of acting in a supernatural way, of judging the world and events from a higher point of view - that of faith - and of behaving as true children of God. They give us the power of knowing God intimately, of loving him as he loves himself and of performing actions which are meritorious for

eternal life. Under the influence of these virtues, our work becomes a treasury of merits for Heaven, although, humanly viewed, it may seem to have little importance.”⁴

In this regard, we must acknowledge that the path to heaven involves a *via negativa* as well as a *via positiva*. The *via negativa* involves avoiding the seven capital or deadly sins: pride, envy, anger, avarice, gluttony, lust, and sloth. The *via positiva* involves more than avoiding these sins, but growing in the virtues that not only counteract them, but which foster an increase in our capacity to love God and neighbor.

There is actually a name for the science of how to grow in virtue. It is called *aretology*. Aretology was founded by the ancient Greek philosophers and enriched by Judeo-Christian thought and spirituality. The name *aretology* derives from *aretē*, the Greek word for virtue. The high school seminary I attended actually bestowed an “*Arete Award*” every year, not necessarily on the smartest student with the highest grade point average, but who demonstrated leadership and character.

Aretology comprises two kinds of virtues: intellectual virtues are related to human knowledge; ethical virtues are related to human behavior.

Ethical virtues are also called human virtues or natural virtues. Supernatural virtues or divine virtues are described by Christian thought, for example, the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. The main human virtues are prudence, courage, temperance or self-control, and justice. St. Ambrose (in the 4th century A.D.) called them cardinal virtues from the Latin word *cardo*, which means “hinge”, because all other virtues hinge or depend on these. Prudence is our ability to make the right choices. Courage is our ability to stay the course in the face of challenges. Temperance or self-control is our ability to subordinate our emotions and passions to the spirit. Justice is our ability to give every person his or her due.

My list of the virtues that counteract the seven capital or deadly sins are as follows:

The antidote to pride is humility—not acting with arrogance, but giving credit to others where credit is due.

The antidote to envy is gratitude—since envy is coveting what someone else has, gratitude helps us to focus on appreciating the gifts that God has given to us and being satisfied with those gifts.

The antidote to anger is patience. Some suggest that the antidote to anger is meekness, but that sounds too passive and acquiescing. A more proactive check on anger is the patience to withhold a negative emotional reaction while trying to correct whatever sparked our anger in the first place.

The antidote to avarice is generosity – instead of greedily seeking more for oneself, avarice is countered giving generously to others.

The antidote to gluttony is, I would suggest, asceticism. I say that because asceticism calls for more than temperance or moderation. Asceticism comes from the Greek word *askeō*: “to exercise” or “to train”, in the sense of learning to control physical or psychological desires in order to attain a spiritual ideal or goal. It is also somewhat different from mortification, in that mortification involves dying to one’s desires, while asceticism implies a more positive restraint of one’s desires in the quest to arrive at a higher level of spiritual fulfilment.

The antidote to lust is chastity or purity, mindful of Our Lord’s teaching that the pure of heart are blessed, for they shall see God (Matt. 5:8).

The antidote to sloth is diligence—carrying out one’s tasks and responsibilities with a sense of dedication and zeal. It is good to note that the

word “diligence” comes from the Latin word, *diligo*, which means to esteem, prize, love, or delight in something. Diligence means we esteem our work and do it with love.

My dear graduates, as you give thanks for the blessings received over the past four years and look with hope to the bright future that God has planned for you, I encourage you to strive to live a virtuous life in a world that is often wicked and immoral. Let people see your faith, your hope, and your love, not only in your words, but also in your actions and your deeds.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Bonnie Hammer, “‘Follow Your Dreams’ and Other Terrible Career Advice,” *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, May 4, 2024.

² Francis Fernandez, *In Conversation with God* (London: Scepter, 2012), vol. 2, p. 530.

³ Francis Fernandez, *In Conversation with God* (London: Scepter, 2012), vol. 2, p. 532-533.

⁴ Francis Fernandez, *In Conversation with God* (London: Scepter, 2012), vol. 2, p. 530.