

**Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2025**

## **Bishop's Homily at Salisbury Confirmation**

As a bishop I get to do some wonderful things but presiding at Confirmation Mass, I've decided, is one of the best. Today is a great day not just for you the candidates but also for your families, for your schools, for your parishes and indeed for the whole church and for the world. That said, I have a confession to make. I do a lot of confirmations over the year, maybe 40 to 50 celebrations and you might think I'd get tired of giving the homily but honestly each time when I stand before a group like you I find myself excited again. Why? Because I'm not just repeating words, I'm standing in front of young people who are saying yes to God in a world that often says no to God.

Before we call down the Holy Spirit you'll be asked to make some powerful promises, the same promises that your godparents and your parents made for you at your baptism, the same promises that people have made down the centuries right back to the first followers of Jesus but this time it's your turn. You are the ones making these promises and as young people beginning to take charge of your lives it's like standing on your own two feet, not just physically but spiritually, morally, emotionally and that's a big deal. I can remember with quite some clarity the first time I really stood on my own spiritually. I was about 16 and I was on a retreat and there was this moment of silence that I can remember very vividly, just me and God and it suddenly dawned on me that faith wasn't just something that my parents had given me, it was also something that I had to choose for myself and it was a bit frightening to realise that but also it was quite freeing and that's where you are this evening.

The first promise that you'll make in a few minutes is like a negative promise but it's still important. The question asked is, do you renounce Satan and all his works and empty promises? Well, what is this empty show of Satan? What are these empty promises? Let me tell you, you hear those empty promises I would say every day, everywhere. Social media is full of them, the idea that you'll be happy if you're rich, that if only you could get some more likes, if you're popular, if you're attractive or successful, an influence, an influencer but you know what? Some of the most anxious, insecure and lonely people in the world are the ones who have ticked all those boxes. This is why we don't have a picture of a billionaire or a celebrity at the front of this church, instead we have an image of a man nailed to a cross, Jesus poor and powerless and scorned and yet the one who is truly free, he doesn't offer fake happiness to you, he offers something much deeper like truth and love and mercy and meaning in life.

In the next confirmation promise you'll say, I believe in God and when we say I believe in God and we say it every Sunday, it's not just about having a religious opinion, a religious standpoint, it is really about the direction of your life. To believe in God is to say my life isn't just about me and that is a huge step to say that because when we're little, life is all about me, life is all about what I need, food, comfort, attention but growing up means realising I'm part of something bigger, a family, a community, a mission. Look at pretty much every major figure in

the Bible from Moses to Mary to Peter and Paul, Joseph, they all discovered their purpose the moment they listened to God's call, saying I believe in God means that you're open to that call too and it might lead you somewhere surprising. I recently met a young woman in Bristol who was working at a homeless shelter part-time while studying and she told me this wasn't my plan at all, I offered to help out one day and ended up going back to help every week and it's a commitment she said but you know what, I've never felt more alive, I've never felt more alive, that's what happens when you allow God to speak into your life.

Then comes another big promise, I believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord and I want you to think about that word Lord. Lord, a Lord is someone who is in charge. Now whether you know it or not, everyone has a Lord, everyone has a someone or a something that rules their life, maybe it's your mobile phone, maybe it's your social media accounts, I hope not because that would be a bit sad or it could be a person or a relationship or an ideology or a political standpoint, it might be your reputation is the Lord in your life, your grades, it could be your mirror or more accurately what you see in the mirror when you face it, you might say no one controls me but something always does. I saw an interview recently with a young, a famous young actor Zendaya and she said you have to stay grounded and keep your sense of self or this industry will decide for you who you are. That's not just about acting, that is life, if you're not clear about what really matters the world will fill in the blanks for you. So when you say Jesus is my Lord, you're saying I want him to tell me who I am, I want to build my life on something deeper than just trends or other people's opinions, that's not small, that's a huge leap and it is real strength. Confirmation marks us forever, literally it leaves a spiritual character or seal on our soul and by the way that word character comes from the Greek for a branding iron, like a permanent mark, a tattoo, it means we belong to Jesus forever.

Next you're going to say that you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. Now don't worry if that sounds a little bit abstract, the easiest way is to think about it is to say that the Holy Spirit is God's love in action, in practice, in fact the Holy Spirit is love, the love that flows between God the Father and God the Son. Whenever you feel properly alive, perhaps moved by beauty or kindness or courage or some moment of joy or even sorrow, if you feel moved by sorrow, whenever you feel inspired by something or somebody, that is the Holy Spirit whispering into your life. Some of you might feel unsure about your faith, that's okay because the Holy Spirit works gently like breathing, in fact the Hebrew word for the Spirit is the same as the word for breathing. Sometimes all it takes is a few moments of silence to feel it, in fact try this sometime, put your phone down, put down all the distractions, take a deep breath, close your eyes and say come Holy Spirit and then just wait, you might be surprised by what happens.

Lastly you will affirm your belief in the Holy Catholic Church. Now I know how this can sound, the church has its flaws okay, like any family, but it's not just a club or an institution, St Paul tells us the church is a living body and now you are part of it. Pope Francis used to say that the church is not a museum or a club for the holy, it's more like a field hospital, that's the image he used, it's like a hospital on a battlefield, a place for healing and mission, which is

a really beautiful image I think, especially in today's world where so many people are hurting or divided or feeling lost or feeling like they don't count, they're not seen, they're not loved. The church is Christ's body on earth and now you're a part of it, you matter, you belong, you have work to do. Sometimes I think people see Confirmation as some sort of graduation, but it's not. Pope Francis again said it best, he said Confirmation is not the Sacramento di Arrivederci, which means (if you're Italian you'll know what that means) it's not the "see you later" sacrament, it's the beginning. You've been given gifts by the Holy Spirit, wisdom, understanding, courage, right judgment, knowledge, reverence and wonder. They're not just for today, they are for the real world, for your friendships, for your choices in life, for the doubts that you might have, for sorting out or thinking about your future.

The last couple of months have been a bit of a roller coaster in the Catholic Church. We heard the sad news of the death of Pope Francis on Easter Monday and then we had the conclave and of course everyone's an expert on conclaves now because they've either seen the film, read the book or seen the real thing and we have a new pope, which is all very exciting if you're a Catholic, but honestly I'm just as hopeful about what's happening right here this evening. You're being confirmed in a world that is full of uncertainty and we all know what that feels like. We might be worried about climate change, in fact there is a phrase, isn't there, climate anxiety. We might be worried about the pictures we see every evening on our television screens of people at war, people firing missiles at each other's countries, pressures on social media which affect particularly young minds. The fear not being enough, not measuring up to this world and yet in that context you are stepping forward saying "I want to follow Christ anyway"—and that's no small thing.

So here's my promise to you this evening. I will remember you in my prayer, not just today but in the weeks to come and I ask you to pray for each other and maybe even pray for the new pope, Pope Leo XIV. I met him by the way but that's for another day, I'll tell you that story. But the church does need a good pope, but as much as that the church needs good young people like you to be courageous and real and authentic and thoughtful and committed and ready to follow Jesus in the real world that we've actually got. I promise to pray for each of you and I ask you to pray for one another. You're not alone, you are part of something that is ancient and powerful and full of hope.