



## **Bishop Frank Caggiano**

### **Message to First Communion Parents**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Heavenly Father, as we gather here in this sacred place, we lift up to you our minds and hearts, and we give you thanks for the blessings you have given us this day, small and big, for accompanying us even in our moments of challenge.

We give you thanks for the gift of your Son who comes in many ways into our lives, but in a privileged way through his sacred body, blood, soul, and divinity.

We give you thanks for our children.

They are precious to us. They are even more precious to you.

May our collaboration help them to grow in wisdom and grace.

May this evening be a time of refreshment in the spirit, a time when we may grow together in fraternity and love, and make us ever more ready to be your faithful witnesses in the world. We make our prayer as we ask all things through Christ our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My friends, I thank you for being here, but may I also thank all of you for being faithful Christian Catholic moms and dads.

I've often said, and I'll say it again tonight, I've said it eighteen times, the most important vocation in the Church is not being a bishop. It's not being a priest. It's not being a member of consecrated life, a religious sister and brother. They are important roles, don't get me wrong, but in this world in which we live, the vocation of being a Christian parent is the most difficult and the most important vocation the Church has.

And so on the day of the baptism of your children, which seems like years ago, was years ago, do you remember what the priest and deacon may have said at the end of the ceremony? He blessed you individually, if you recall. And in that moment, in that blessing, he said that you were the best teachers of the faith.

That translation in English has been changed because it doesn't quite do justice to the Latin word. The Latin word actually is better translated as witness, and that is precisely what I'm thanking you for doing day in and day out a thousand times every day.

For to say that you loved your children is an understatement, but the fact that you witnessed that love to them every day is essential to their formation and faith in Jesus Christ.

You are not their friends. You are their parents.

Yes? Yes. And how many times did our parents say to us, this is gonna hurt me more than it hurts you?

Or they said, my father used to say to me, you don't understand this now, but when you're older, you will understand why I'm saying what I'm saying. And as, you know, young grads say, you're right.

But in fact, he was right, and I was not.

You know, think of all the ways you encourage them. You challenge them. You correct them. You feed them.

You clothe them, you bring them to school, you sit with homework with them, you're patient with them, you're kind with them, you discipline them, you correct. All of that is witnessing to love. Now you may say, so why is that so important? On the human level, it's essential.

On the faith level, it's even more essential. Why?

Because in the in the epistle that Saint John wrote, the first epistle, there is one line in that epistle that is like spiritual dynamite. There is one line that summarizes all of Catholic faith.

It's three words.

With all due respect to the catechism and everything else we have, all our textbooks, and that sentence is God is love.

Notice, Saint John does not say God loves. He says God is love. And when you think about it, everything we hold, that the Trinity, we say, is a community of divine persons because God is love, and love demands more than one.

And he is eternal and perfect in that love. When we say that the Lord Jesus came into the world, he took on flesh.

He is love made visible.

And in two weeks, when you and I go to our respective churches, on the day we call good, Good Friday, when Jesus chose to die.

He chose to die so that you and I and your son and daughter and all who believe in him may have eternal life, our sins forgiven, and live in glory. He paid the price. We get the result.

You see, my friends, it is all about how love has come into the universe, not only to create it and sustain it, but recreate it and bring it to glory.

And if you could imagine someone growing up never feeling as if they were loved, never having the experience of being loved, never in any concrete way thinking that someone cares about them simply because they are that, they are who they are. When we say at the pulpit, we say in the classroom, we say in the Bible, "God is love," they're gonna think this is crazy. Because whatever you're talking about, I have no idea what it means.

So you see, your vocation is essential, and I'm grateful for all that you do until they are old enough to say thank you to you as well.

Now, we have two families, don't we? We have our natural families, and they come in all shapes and sizes in the modern world.

And then there is the ecclesial family, the family that we form in our parishes, across our parishes throughout the Church in space and in time from the very beginning.

And therefore, these two families work together to help form one another in faith, and in this case, your children.

Right? Natural parents, spiritual parents work together.

Many times, my friends, we as Catholic Christians forget the power and grace and beauty and blessing of our ecclesial family, our Church family, if I could call it, our parish family, however you wanna call it.

If I may tell you a story, my father was an immigrant, my mother was also. They were born and raised, and they were married in Italy. My sister was born in Italy. They came in the late fifties.

And my father was a very simple man, yet very strict. He lived his life the way he was taught to live it by my grandfather and his father before him.

And so my father, it was all about family, faith, and food, the three f's. It's my father.

So I have an older sister, and I love my sister. I was just joking with Patrick [Donovan]. He's heard this story many times. I love my sister. My sister's three years older. Growing up, you would never think we loved each other because we fought all the time, literally every day, every single day.

And many times, my father would be patient, sit at the table, and watch us go at it because all of our fighting was done around the table.

Until one day, my sister said something, which I thought was ridiculous, because everything well... it was another story. And so I got up, and my father just literally took me and literally put me back in my chair, and before my sister got up, he held her in her chair, and we got the speech. And I got that speech maybe a thousand times after. My father was a longshoreman, unloaded ships for thirty six years. His forearm was like my thigh, huge. My father rolled up his sleeve and his veins were protruding out. He looked and he said to my sister, do you see this?

You. Do you see this? You see the blood that's in this vein? The same blood that's in this vein is in you and in you. You wanna fight? Go right ahead. When you get up from this table, remember we are one family, and don't you ever forget it.

Now, with all due respect to my father, blood is thicker than water.

Grace is thicker than blood.

So the same Holy Spirit alive in you is alive in your children, is alive in me.

That makes us really brothers and sisters, not just metaphorical, descriptive, nice idea. We are truly brothers and sisters, which means that when you are suffering, we are all suffering. When you are joyful, we are all joyful. When your children need help, we are all there to be of help.

And so we are in this together because love has brought us together. Not a rule, not an obligation. It's because it's love that we share together as one family.

So I grew up. I'm sixty seven years old in a couple weeks.

I know I don't look it. Right? No. Thank you. Thank you. Hold your applause.

Now so when I grew up in Brooklyn, when we talk about this partnership, it was a very different reality.

Because most of my formation in the faith did not occur in the classroom. It occurred everywhere else. I had eight aunts and uncles within eight nine city blocks, eight city blocks of where we lived, twenty one first cousins. All my coaches went to Mass. The

sisters lived down the block. I mean, it was my neighbor next door who was my adopted grandmother. To be Christian, to be Catholic was everywhere, in our food, in our rituals, in our traditions, in the calendar we kept in school, outside of school, on the ball field, everywhere.

And so the family was everywhere, but now my friends, you and I live in a world that's very different, and our young people live in a world very different.

So what the Church has done is try to meet those challenges with you in partnership. So allow me just to explain that because it leads then to a fundamental question.

Okay. So when I went to school, I went to Catholic school, but even if you went to religious education, we called it education in the faith. And the expectation was that my parents sent me so that I would learn the rules, the commandments, the catechism, the Bible, to learn the stuff of faith. So it was all up here.

Formation was occurring everywhere else.

But you see, my friends, we live in a time where too many young people think religion is only up here.

So what is Confirmation?

Graduation. We're done.

Finished.

So the Church, realizing that, has changed its language and its approach in so much as the whole idea of forming in the faith is more than just the mind, is more than just knowing about Jesus.

I mean, forgive me for being blunt, but even the father of evil knows about Jesus. Even the father of evil can quote the gospels.

It's not enough.

So the Church is saying, no, we are in the business with you of partnering together to help form them in the faith. Form them in the faith. What does that mean?

Okay. I'm gonna ask you to consider in your mind's eye, recall in your head and experience where you fell in love, perhaps the first time you fell in love.

Recall what that was like.

Recall what changed in your life.

For most of us probably that happened in high school, I would think.

And as soon as you met the guy or the gal that caught your eye and somehow something just changed. It just flipped on.

Recall what happened. The first thing you had was a thousand questions. What is her name? Where does she live?

Where does she go? Who are friends? What classes does she take? Because you're consumed with this person who has caught your eye. Who is this person?

And then what do we do?

We connived perhaps with friends to figure out a way where we could always be in their presence, supposedly accidentally, supposedly by, "Oh, you're here. Oh, this is where you come. Oh, I didn't know you went to class," which in fact we did. That's a lie.

That's another story.

Because why? It wasn't enough to know about the person. We wanted to be with the person because we began to sense that the person gives us something that is beyond price, that the person is entering into our hearts, claiming our hearts, and more than just our hearts, eventually, if it's true love, will claim everything about me.

Because the way we act begins to change.

I remember when I went to Regis, and it was an all boys high school, the Jesuits say, "Pray to fall in love soon so you can clean yourselves up."

Because we began to act differently.

And those of you who fell in love and married, what did you do?

You made a choice to give your whole life, including your body, to the person you love for your whole life.

Who in this church, if you were crossing the street with your son or daughter or your husband or wife and realized in a split second the car that is careening down the street is going to hit them and kill them, who in this church would not pick up our little son and daughter, literally throw them aside, and have the car hit us?

Do you see what I mean?

The mind, the heart, and the will is all about falling in love.

So what is it that you and I, natural family and Church family, what are we trying to do here? We are trying to create the opportunities where the Holy Spirit can allow that one moment where our children get it, where it's no longer Jesus as an historic figure, as a nice guy, as a prophet, as a guru who teaches me how to live. It's not because of Jesus who I have to learn about because I have to pass this test to graduate in Confirmation. It's none of that.

It's something that changes which we then carry our whole life. I mean, as I said, at this point in my life, my relationship with the Lord is very different than when I was first ordained a priest thirty nine years ago or when I was in high school when I was sixteen years of age. Very different.

But the love changes. It's no different than you and your spouse.

Your love is changing, deepening.

I often joked with my mother when we would go out to the restaurant to eat and we would go there and we would sit there, because we're always talking blah blah blah blah blah, and you would see these elderly couples and these couples were sitting there saying nothing, and I would say to my mother, but, like, why are they spending money sitting there not [talking]? Stay home. Like, what's the point?

And my mother would say something in Italian that I won't repeat here in church, and then she would say, But you don't understand what's going on here.

She said, this couple could be married, who knows, forty, fifty, sixty years. Their love has matured so that they know what they are thinking by the very expression on their face. And therefore, they're not angry. This is a testimony of what love could look like. And it took me aback.

So you see, my friends, formation of faith is an invitation for us to work together for our children to be able to understand, experience, and fall in love with Jesus.

Why?

Because of our common hope.

And there's the last piece, and I call it transformation.

It's a nice way of saying the following: when your children are teenagers or older, they will find themselves in situations, as you and I found ourselves in situations at that age, where they may have to make a choice, perhaps something within themselves,

something that's being offered to them, something that's being said to them, something that's being tempted to them, whatever it may be, a choice. And you and I know that it takes only one bad choice to sometimes wreck an entire life.

So in that moment, you will not be there, we will not be there, how do they make that choice?

How do they stand up to do what they know is right?

Not because you solely taught it, but because they believe it.

Who will be there with them except the Lord Jesus and the power of his Holy Spirit?

And I know how parents worry, particularly as their children grow older, both in high school and when they go away to college.

What are their friends saying? What are the influences? Where are they going?

And you know what? Love, at a certain point, you can't control it all, but you don't have to because the Lord's there.

You see, so that is really our evolution with you to position our young people to be able to understand the glory and beauty and the dignity and the wonder of this human life lived in Jesus Christ.

And if I may, for those of you who have attended my Confirmations, you have heard me say this. I will say it again. I will keep saying it until God takes my life.

Our young people are growing up in a world where in a thousand ways they are being told through entertainment, social media, advertising, so many other ways that they will never be beautiful enough, never be handsome enough, never be attractive enough, never be rich enough, never be smart enough, never be athletic, and the list goes on and on and on, unless you buy those shoes, you look like that, you're this skinny, that you have these friends, that you listen to that music, and the list goes on and on and on. Because the world wants to make them a center of consumption.

The world's not interested in their dignity. It's interested in their money.

Forgive me.

And in that world, a young person grows up and can actually come to the conclusion that I will never be worth it, that I will never be loved simply because of who I am. And you and I know that's a lie.

If you and I were the only ones ever to live, [Christ] would have done this just for you or me.

And so this partnership that exists, these two families, is so that when this process begins, they realize, they feel it in their mind, their heart, and that, yes, God loves them the way they are, and God loves them so much that he doesn't want to keep them just the way they are.

He wants to lead them to greatness, to a life that is beautiful, joyful, rooted in value and faith that no one can take away.

This is why we're here today.

And that is why your vocation is so beautiful and why we are here to help you in any way we can, and that will be Patrick's more practical help in just a few minutes.

But before I end, I have two other points I wanna make, and point number one is this.

I come to you as your spiritual grandfather, since these men are your spiritual fathers. So as a grandfather, you tell it like it is.

And I'm gonna ask you a question for no other purpose than because I want you to think about it.

After everything I just described about the world, how often do you doubt that God loves you just the way you are?

With your secrets, your faults, your mistakes, your regrets.

It's easy for us to sit and wonder to ourselves, "If the bishop knew half of what he was talking about, if he knew half of what happened in my life, or if you knew what happened in my life and some of the stupid decisions I've made growing up..."

If we talked about our sins, we would sit there and say, "There's no way."

God loves me despite me, and the answer to that is no, he does not.

God loves you in a way that I can't even describe, not just your children, but you.

And if you're sitting there saying, "Bishop, I don't even know. To be honest, right now, I can't even answer your question." But that's okay, because chances are most of us can't answer the question.

At different times of the day, wherever we happen to be. That's why we're a family.

That is why you're here, because the truth is your children depend on you. Yes.

But we need to depend on each other as adults and be able to gradually have the same thing happen that we want to our children to you and me.

And even I, all these years after ordination, being a bishop of the Church, all the experiences I have, even my relationship continues to deepen and grow until I die.

And there are moments of challenge where I wonder to myself, "Lord, what are you doing?"

And I have to stop and pause and remind myself that the Lord is always there, even for me.

So there's nobody in this room that's exempt from that.

So if you say, "Well, Bishop, I don't even know how to answer the question," then let me ask three questions in relation to the question. Question number one, ask yourself, "Well, I do wanna love Jesus. I'm here. I mean, I go to church. I mean, I but you know what? I don't know enough about him. I stopped asking questions about him years ago."

Well, maybe this is something where we can help you.

Who is this Lord?

What do the Scriptures say? What does the Church teach? What does your heart say?

Right? If you have questions saying, I can learn more, we are here to help you.

No different than in the heart. You know, there's a difference between saying prayers and praying. When your children say their prayers, they are praying for their age. But I, much older, when I say my prayers, my prayers are meant to help me to pray, but they're just the jumping off point.

Praying is talking to God.

Praying can be done anywhere.

It requires recollection and silence.

And so the question is, you may say, "Well, Bishop, I do love Jesus, and I do know my prayers, and I say my prayers. But the idea of sitting and talking with him, sitting and listening to him, sitting and and recognizing his presence, I'm not sure how to do that." We're here to help you because there are ways to learn how to do that.

Once again, I don't wanna be too personal, but I get up at four thirty in the morning every single day because it's the only peace I have all day long, in the morning.

And when I sit in my chair to start my prayers, I cannot tell you, my friends, how many mornings it's a struggle for me to calm my mind. Because the sort of personality I have, I know what I left on my desk, I know what's in my briefcase, I know the problems I have to solve, I know the people I have to see, I know the sacraments I have to celebrate, I have to figure out what I'm going to say in my homilies, and the list goes on and on and on.

And the Lord says, "Frank, sit down and be quiet. Just shut up. Let me do the talking."

Does that sound familiar?

We're not alone here in doing that.

So if you're saying to yourself, well, Bishop, "How do you do that? How do I pray?" We're here to help you.

And then I'm going to tell you one last thing, and this is a little bit more personal too, but you have to forgive me.

Patrick will do a great job with this in just a couple minutes, which is *example*.

Children watch.

Well, does my lifestyle, my decisions, my words, my values match the person I'm in love with, who's called Jesus?

Again, we all have work to do there.

But let me tell you a story. It's a little bit involved, but it moves me even now to this day. In about 1965-ish, I think it was, more or less, my mother had surgery.

I had no idea.

No idea. She actually had breast cancer, which I learned years later.

And in those days, before the longshoremen unionized with containerization, and all the rest, you worked and you got paid. You didn't work, you didn't get paid.

So my father convinced my mother to come home from the hospital in one day.

In those days, they did not kick you out of the hospital. You could stay for a few days if you had surgery. Anyway, I remember my mother coming home all wrapped up, and I thought, what is going on?

And my parents said, let's go to church.

We go to the rectory.

My sister's older. In those days, you went to Catholic school. When lunchtime came in school, you had to go home. Everybody walked home. All one thousand two hundred students walked home for lunch and walked back, all of them.

And my mother, being the mother that she was, would go to school, pick my sister, come back, walk back, come back.

So they went to the pastor, imagine this, to ask permission for my sister to eat lunch at her desk for one week. Five days, until my mother had the stitches taken out. And you know what the pastor said?

The pastor said, "If you people wanna have children, that's your problem. The answer is no."

Now, I was very proud that my father got up and did not hit the priest.

It was very good. That was a plus.

But he walked out and did not go to Mass for twenty six years.

However, the year after, in January, in the neighborhood, we were going to buy bread, and on the way back, on West fifth and Avenue, four blocks from where we lived, we encountered a man.

I was, I don't know, six, seven, whatever it was.

This guy scared the daylight out of me, so much so that I'd remember hiding behind my father.

And my father, being the longshoreman that he was, went right up to him. Conversation. I don't know what they were talking about. I just wanted to get out of there.

And my father, I mean, even I could see it like it happened yesterday, my father stopped when they finished, took off his coat, and handed it to the man.

And we walked home in January, my father wearing short sleeves.

Never said anything, never explained it. I never asked because I was afraid. I mean, the whole thing was just... I said this to Patrick years later, years later, I finally figured out that was the first homeless person I ever met in my life, in my entire life.

Was my father a perfect witness? No.

But my father in that moment taught me what generosity means more than any priest, any bishop, any pope, any homily, any teacher, any book I've ever read in my entire life.

And the truth be told, two weeks before I was ordained a priest, my mother, who never spoke up to my father, had Sunday dinner, stood up and said to my father, "You are not going to embarrass me in front of my son when he's ordained a priest. You are going to Mass."

And my father was defeated.

Started to go to Mass every Sunday, and, my friends, before my father died, he went to Mass every day.

So virtue, generosity, honesty, prudence, temperance.

You may say, "I don't even know what prudence is!" We're here to help you.

We're here to help you, not just to learn it, but to live it together, all of us together.

Because in the end, I'm not suggesting this just for your children's sake, but for yours.

For yours.

Because if I get to heaven, please God I will, I want to see in heaven not just your children, I want to see you together, all of us, one family in heaven.

So I have three asks, and I'm done. Ask number one, pray with your children every day. I don't care when you do it. You could do it in the car, you could do it before a meal, when they go to bed, when they wake up.

Just find the time to pray every day with your children.

My mother would pray, no words.

My mother would pray, she would bless us, my sister and myself, on our foreheads, And I knew my mother was praying, my mother was blessing me. That was our prayer.

Find what's comfortable, but please do it every day. That witness is priceless.

Number two, you know what I'm gonna say.

Could somebody shout it out? What do we do Sunday morning? Amen. I want you to come to Mass every Sunday or Saturday night.

I get it. You're busy. I get it. My niece has an eight year old and an eleven year old.

I hear it every time I call her. I'm going here, I'm going there, I have this, I have the other thing, soccer, and I woah, woah, woah. I get it. It's busy.

I get it.

But you know what, my friends? On this altar here at Saint James and all the parishes that you may ever go to, all in Stratford, here, what does the Church believe?

You see, the Fathers of the Church say that on this altar, heaven and earth kiss.

The elements of this earth, through the power of the Holy Spirit, become the enduring presence of Christ and his death and resurrection. To put it another way, bread and wine is not bread and wine. It's truly, really, substantially, eternally Jesus Christ, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity.

And that which happened in Calvary once in all history and time, we enter into that grace through that sacrament.

So I'm suggesting to come to Sunday Mass. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying come to Sunday Mass for your children's sake. I'm saying it for your sake and my sake.

Or as I once heard in theology class, and forgive me, but, "The Eucharist is the antipasto of heaven, the first taste of eternal life."

So whatever it is, please rearrange things to come.

And if you say, well, I can't receive Holy Communion, come talk to us. We're here to help you.

And the last thing is the story of my father. Give witness by a virtuous life because that speaks volumes, volumes to our young people.

Let me just end by saying this, I pray for you every day.

I don't pray for you by name because that would be the whole day, but I pray for all of you and the work God has given you.

And I know you pray for me simply by coming to Mass because I'm included in the Eucharistic prayer, but what we're about here is not just your little ones.

It's your little ones, you, me, your pastors, all of us, walking together hand in hand to the glory that Christ promises us in our baptism.

And we're going to do this together.