

St. Rose Academy 8th Grade Graduation – May 20, 2026 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 5:30pm Mass – 865 words

In God's providence, your 8th grade graduation falls on the feast day of St. Bernardine of Siena, a great Italian Franciscan saint who lived from 1380 to 1444. He initially grew up in a town near the coast, but then moved to Siena, after being orphaned at age 6; for there, he had an aunt who took him in. She was a devout Catholic and provided for Bernardine to receive a good education. He was a virtuous young man, and at age 17 joined a group called the Confraternity of Our Lady, which cared for the sick in the hospital. Like Birmingham, Siena has always been an important hospital city.

It was around that time that the Bubonic Plague struck the Siena area, and so Bernardine began attending to those who were dying of that truly dreadful disease. And it did not take long for so many doctors, nurses, and hospital administrators to have been affected by the Plague themselves, that Bernardine, in emergency circumstances, had to take over running the hospital. He wasn't trained to be a hospital administrator nor was he a medical professional, but he was a smart and resourceful man and managed to keep the thing going until better times prevailed. Then he himself got sick.

His sickness wasn't the Plague, but a form of exhaustion that led to his being on bed-rest for about four months. During that period, he spent a lot of time in reflection and prayer, and he realized that God was calling him to be a Franciscan priest. So when he recovered, he answered God's call. And it wasn't long before he was put in charge of a friary, then began a career of preaching, for which he ultimately became famous. Preaching at that time was commonly done in public squares, and the sermons were often hours long. Of course, this was before television and all our media and electronics!

Bernardine preached in simple, direct language that even the uneducated could understand, and he used the local dialect, too. And because of his persuasive style in teaching on the faith and addressing the moral problems of the time, thousands came to hear him. Some historians think that as many as 500,000 Catholics who had fallen away from the practice of the faith came back to the sacraments because of his preaching – and many others converted besides. And his trademark – if we might say it that way – was to preach on devotion to and reverence for the Holy Name of Jesus.

Yes, he had a symbol that he would show to the assembled crowd: it had the letters "IHS", which are the first three letters of the name "Jesus" in Greek (I know you've seen that symbol before), but in Bernardine's case, the letters were surrounded by a sunburst, to symbolize the light of Christ. In fact, you can still see it on many public buildings throughout Siena and the surrounding region of Tuscany, if you travel to Italy today. St. Bernardine knew that if people held the holy name of Jesus in reverence and thought of it often, it would help them to re-center their lives and live well.

In the first reading, Saint Peter taught us that there is no other name in heaven under which the human race can be saved, other than the holy name of Jesus. He is the one savior of the human race. It seems to me that as you prepare to go forth to bigger and better things, both Saint Bernardine and Saint Peter are echoing to you today what you have already learned in your time at Saint Rose Academy: to keep Jesus Christ at the center of your lives and to hold his name in reverence. For reverence helps us to open our hearts more fully to God, to be disposed to receive his grace.

And in the gospel, Jesus encountered different people who seemed to be willing to follow him, but were perhaps surprised where doing so might lead or what it would require. They put conditions on saying "yes" to Jesus. I wonder if St. Bernardine was ever tempted in that regard, also? He had gotten a fine education, including in law, and had his whole life ahead of him, no

doubt with some plans about what it might look like. But then, God called him to go in a very new direction. Thankfully, he said “yes”, and Jesus worked mightily through him, such that he ultimately became a great saint.

So you all go forth, and will hopefully live lives of virtue like St. Bernardine did from a young age; hopefully you will keep Jesus at the center and be influential in leading others to him, like St. Bernardine did; hopefully you will also never be afraid to say “yes” to the Lord when he calls you in one direction or another, even if surprises you or otherwise changes your plans – again, like St. Bernardine. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the one savior of the human race; he alone can make us truly happy and lead us to perfect fulfillment. May his holy name never be far from your thoughts, your lips, your hearts!