

**Memorial Day Mass at Calvary Cemetery  
Springfield, Illinois**

**May 26, 2014**

**Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated men and women, esteemed members of the military, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as we gather for our annual Memorial Day Mass here at Calvary Cemetery, we continue a tradition that has become an important part of our national identity as we commemorate the sacrifices of those men and women who died in order to secure the freedom which we enjoy today.

The origins of this national day of prayer are found after the conclusion of the Civil War. In 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic, Major General John A. Logan, began what was called Decoration Day. Decoration Day was set aside as a day to honor the war dead by decorating their graves with flowers. General Logan said the following regarding this practice of remembrance and respect:

We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. ... Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or

to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic.<sup>1</sup>

After World War I, the scope of the observance of this day was expanded to honor those who have died in all American wars. In 1971, Memorial Day was declared a national holiday by an act of Congress, though it is still often called Decoration Day. It was then also placed on the last Monday in May, as some other federal holidays were also moved to Mondays.

Memorial Day is observed in various ways throughout the country in order to raise awareness and respect for the sacrifices of our beloved war dead. Many towns hold parades featuring the various branches of the military, in addition to other patriotic themes. It is also common for there to be concerts featuring patriotic music. It is also a common practice to hold various types of services at cemeteries throughout the country, as we are doing here today.

Visiting cemeteries, whether on Memorial Day or any other day, is a practice which people have done for centuries. In his Wednesday Audience for All Souls Day in 2011, Pope Benedict offered the following reflection on this practice of visiting the final resting places of the dead:

Human beings have always cared for their dead and sought to give them a sort of second life through attention, care and affection. In a way, we want to preserve their experience of life; and, paradoxically, by looking at their graves, before which countless memories return, we discover how they lived, what they loved, what they feared, what they hoped for and what they hated. They are almost a mirror of their world.<sup>2</sup>

Although we may not know the individuals that we honor today, we are mindful of the collective dedication of those many men and women who saw the value of freedom, justice, and peace as something for which they were willing to sacrifice, even with the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. We are therefore inspired by their example and we seek to preserve and carry on that spirit in our lives and in our country, fighting for those same values that are threatened today both from within and from without.

When speaking of the memory of our beloved deceased who have made this sacrifice, many talk about giving something back in gratitude for the gift they have so generously given to us. How we actually do this is slightly ambiguous as it is difficult for us conceive of how we can give something to those who are dead. In an attempt to address this, the

president signed into law “The National Moment of Remembrance Act” in December 2000.

This act created the White House Commission on the National Moment of Remembrance. The commission’s charter is to “encourage the people of the United States to give something back to their country, which provides them so much freedom and opportunity” by encouraging and coordinating commemorations in the United States of Memorial Day and the National Moment of Remembrance. The National Moment of Remembrance encourages all Americans to pause wherever they are at 3 p.m. local time on Memorial Day for a minute of silence to remember and honor those who have died in service to the nation. As Moment of Remembrance founder Carmella LaSpada states: “It’s a way we can all help put the memorial back in Memorial Day.”<sup>3</sup>

Our remembrance of the deceased by pausing for a moment of silence, along with our desire to continue in the dedication and zeal for the values for which they lived and died, keep us connected to these individuals. There is, however, a disconnect that we still experience in that these people are no longer among us, but have passed on from this life.

This is where our faith bridges that mysterious gap between the living and the dead, reminding us that even death cannot separate us from them. Our faith in the communion of saints makes us aware that what unites us with the dead is more than just a memory or the carrying on of an ideal. We believe that we remain united in the bonds of grace given in our Baptism with those who have died and that we continue to assist one another through our prayers for them and their prayers for us.

This is the overarching reason that we are here today, to implore God's mercy upon the souls of the faithful departed, that through our prayers, those who are still in need of purification may be cleansed and share in the gift of eternal life which we all hope to attain. We also count on the prayers of those who are already enjoying their reward and who desire with great love for us to be likewise found worthy to join them in the Heavenly Kingdom.

May our observance of this Memorial Day be an opportunity for us not just to remember those who have died for our country, but may we truly give back to them in the most effective and powerful way possible, by offering our prayers for them, especially as we commend them to God's mercy in this most perfect prayer of the Mass, whereby Christ conquered

sin and death so that we might be reunited with Him and all of our beloved dead in the glory of eternal life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of Veteran Affairs, "Memorial Day History." [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).

<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 2 November 2011.

<sup>3</sup> US Department of Veteran Affairs, "Memorial Day History." [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).