

**Homily for Easter Vigil Mass
April 4, 2015**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: in just over a month, we will commemorate the 70th Anniversary of V-E Day, the day on which the Allied troops declared victory in the European theatre of World War II. The war in Europe had lasted nearly six years and claimed the lives of millions of troops from several nationalities, in addition to millions more killed through the horrific actions of the Holocaust. Needless to say, the victory was won at a great cost to humanity.

On the day of the victory, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill addressed a large crowd in London, celebrating the fact that the battles that had been fought so bravely had finally been won. In the midst of the jubilation, Churchill reminded the people that, even though they were able to take a night off for rejoicing, there was still a war to fight alongside the Americans in the Pacific theatre of the war. He concluded his speech by

saying: “We will go hand and hand with them. Even if it is a hard struggle we will not be the ones who will fail.”¹

Although the analogy falls short, there is at least some similarity to be found between the sentiments expressed by Mr. Churchill on that day in 1945 and what we celebrate today on this day of Christ’s victory over sin and death in the Resurrection. We take this moment to pause and relish in the glory of the triumph of Christ who overcame every assault of the enemy and now reigns victorious for all of eternity in Heaven.

Even while we pause to praise our Lord for the gift of His defeat of our age-old nemesis, we know that there are many battles that lie ahead for us who have chosen to join our alliances to Christ and His Church. Our own personal experience shows us that living the life of Christianity does not mean that we will not struggle. Rather, we can expect to encounter resistance from the world around us and challenges from the Devil, also called the prince of the world, when we choose to live our lives according to the Gospel. Jesus made this quite clear when He told His disciples: “In the world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). But He does not leave it at that, for He follows this warning up with words of great hope as He tells them: “but take courage, I have conquered the world.”

We too are invited to have this same courage when we are confronted with the battles that lie ahead of us, for by His death and Resurrection, which we celebrate today, He has overcome the world and every possible obstacle that could be placed in our way. We, who have been baptized in Christ, have died to our old way of life and have risen to share in His divine life, becoming heirs of the promise that we too will one day share in the victory of eternal life.

The beautiful liturgy of the Easter Vigil is a gift given to us by the Church each year to renew our hope and encourage us to persevere in moving forward on our path of discipleship. The Old Testament readings paint a picture of God's loving care for His people throughout history. Even though our ancestors strayed away from that love on many occasions, God would not give up on the people He had chosen to be His own.

In the battles that they faced from their enemies and the struggles that they faced among themselves, God demonstrated time and again that He would continue to fight for them and give them the help that they would need, just as He did when He freed His people from slavery in Egypt, parting the Red Sea and thus providing a way out of their

tribulation. Every generation can count on that same promise that, no matter what the trial, God will provide a way to safety.

Every generation has been in need of this reminder of God's protection and ultimate victory, for there has never been a time in which no challenges to the Christian way of life were present. The experience of the early Church, which we will hear about in detail throughout the Easter Season in the Acts of the Apostles, was one of constant trial. It was the memory of the victory won on Easter Sunday that gave them the strength to keep from backing down in the face of what seemed to be impossible odds.

When times seemed bleak for Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular, the Easter message of victory was never extinguished. Just as the light of the Paschal Candle pierced the darkness of the night and led us forward this evening, so too does our faith in the power of Christ lead us on through the dark stretches of history, past, present, and future.

In our modern day, we are just as much in need of that message of hope as any other time in history. Just a few days ago, we heard of the shocking news of the killing of 148 people at a college in Kenya, a premeditated attack specifically targeted against Christians. This is just

one incident in the recent rash of violence against Christians in our world, particularly in the Middle East and parts of Africa. Such sobering reports leave us with a great sense of sadness and even fear.

In addition to the various forms of physical violence against Christians, we have many examples of ways in which our Catholic and Christian values are being attacked in our world through unjust laws and attitudes which chip away at the foundations that had, at one time, been so solidly established. Finally, there are the many adversities that we may face in our individual lives, such as sickness or other personal setbacks, which can tempt us to question or even doubt our faith.

It can be easy to be pessimistic and without hope in the face of so many trials that confront us, and it is for that reason that we need the Good News of the Resurrection to shake us out of our preoccupation with focusing on the shadow of the Cross in order to see the glory of the empty tomb. The words of St. Augustine, written over 1500 years ago, are every bit as applicable to us today as they were then when he wrote that: "We are an Easter people, and 'alleluia' is our song." We are invited to be that Easter people who are always mindful that Christ has already won the

victory for us. Knowing that, we can have the courage to fight our battles, confident that at the end of our journey, we too will share in that victory.

Let us return to the words of Winston Churchill on V-E Day, this time hearing them through the ears of faith as those Easter people who are united with the Risen Christ and who celebrate with great joy this definitive day of victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and life over death, for all eternity: “We will go hand and hand with them. Even if it is a hard struggle, we will not be the ones who will fail.”

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Winston Churchill, Speech to V-E Crowds, 8 May 1945. www.winstonchurchill.org.