

**Homily for the Diocesan Blue Mass for Police and Law Enforcement Officers,
Firefighters, Paramedics, and other First Responders**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
September 28, 2021**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good that we are here to celebrate this Blue Mass, so called in honor of police and law enforcement personnel, firefighters, paramedics, and other first responders, for whom we pray in this Mass in thanksgiving for their dedicated and self-sacrificing service to our community and to ask for God's blessings and protection in their work.

Earlier this month our nation marked the twentieth anniversary of the terrorist airplane attacks of 9/11. Most of us probably remember exactly where we were when we heard this news. At the time, I was Pastor of St. Constance Parish near Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. I had just finished celebrating morning Mass and went to the rectory to have breakfast. I turned on the television in the kitchen and heard the news that an airplane had crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

At first, no one knew what to make of this strange incident, which initially seemed to be some sort of bizarre accident. That perception changed drastically and dramatically within a few minutes as a second plane crash into the South Tower of the World Trade Center. Then a third plane crashed into the west side of the Pentagon (headquarters of the United States Department of Defense) near Washington, D.C. Shortly thereafter, United Airlines Flight 93 crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after the plane's courageous passengers attempted to regain control of the aircraft away from the hijackers. In doing so, at the cost of their lives, they successfully diverted the flight from its intended target, which was either the White House or the U.S. Capitol.

It was now abundantly clear that the United States of America was under attack on her own soil, but it was not immediately clear who was attacking us or what the extent of the attack would be. I returned to church to pray, and was joined by several parishioners who spontaneously came to church to seek divine protection. This continued for the next couple of weeks as people would drop by the church for at least a few minutes to pray at various times throughout the day.

As people came to church, I thought perhaps this attack was waking people from their spiritual slumber to realize how vulnerable we really are and how dependent we are on God's providence. Unfortunately, this spiritual awakening did not last very long. Within just a few weeks after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, many people returned to their irreligious ways of life. Indeed, in the last twenty years our society has become increasingly polarized and divided. People not only disagree vehemently about almost everything, but do so with a lack of basic courtesy, lack of common civility, and lack of Christian charity, as they hurl crude insults and vulgar profanities at their opponents.

When evil strikes, such as the Holocaust during World War II or the 9/11 terrorist attacks of twenty years ago, people tend either to turn more resolutely to God for His divine assistance or they turn quite decidedly away from God, questioning how a loving God could allow such evils to happen. People of faith understand that God has given everyone a free will, which means that bad things happen when people exercise their freedom and choose to reject God and commit their evil deeds.

People who live as if there is no God also live as if He gave us no commandments, the greatest of which, of course, is to love God with all your

heart and mind and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27). Jesus also taught His disciples to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44) and to forgive those who have harmed them if they expect God to forgive their sins (Matt. 6:15).

Loving our enemies does not mean that we can never disagree with anyone, but we must make every effort to resolve our disputes with reasoned arguments and civil discourse, not with vicious personal attacks.

The context for today's first reading from the prophet Zechariah is the 6th century before Christ, after the return of the Jews to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon and shortly before the dedication of the rebuilt temple in 515 B.C.

We can easily see why the Jews who experienced the Babylonian exile would conclude that Lord had abandoned Jerusalem: The elite citizens were deported to Babylon; the walls of the city were torn down; and worst of all, the temple, God's house, was destroyed. In today's first reading, the prophet challenges their assumption and lifts their spirits by assuring them that God had not abandoned them or their capital city. His oracle affirms that even foreigners, people of other nations, will flock to Jerusalem, convinced that God is there, and there they shall find favor with the Lord.

One people not likely to flock to Jerusalem were the Jews' northern neighbors, the Samaritans, who thought of themselves as authentic worshippers of God and who insisted that Mt. Gerizim—not Mt. Zion—should be the site of God's temple; the hostility between Jews and Samaritans was centuries old. It was not surprising then that Jesus was not welcomed in a Samaritan village or that James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume them, as we heard in today's Gospel passage.

Jesus, however, had other ideas about how to treat one's enemies. Christ's patience with His enemies made possible the day when groups of Samaritans would be baptized in Jesus' name and receive the Holy Spirit through the preaching of Peter and John (Acts 8:14-17). What is the lesson here? It is natural for us to feel anger and outrage at the perpetrators of 9/11, even twenty years after that catastrophic event. But the lesson Christ teaches us is that we should not seek revenge against our enemies, nor should we dismiss our enemies; God may bring them to conversion and make them friends after all.

Is this realistic, or is this some impossible pipedream? Well, after the Civil War, during which people from the North and the South were literally at each other's throats, President Abraham Lincoln called for reconciliation

and reconstruction, not revenge, and our nation was rebuilt. During World War II, my father served as a sergeant in the United States Army in the European theater of war. I remember when I was growing up in the 1950s that it was still not very acceptable to buy products made in Germany or in Japan. Over the decades, the Germans and the Japanese became our allies and our friends. We have done this before. We can do it again.

During his visit to Ground Zero in New York on April 20, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI concluded his prayer with this plea for peace and love, which we do well to make our own prayer now:

God of peace, bring your peace to our violent world: peace in the hearts of all men and women and peace among the nations of the earth. Turn to your way of love those whose hearts and minds are consumed with hatred.

God of understanding, overwhelmed by the magnitude of this tragedy, we seek your light and guidance as we confront such terrible events. Grant that those whose lives were spared may live so that the lives lost here may not have been lost in vain. Comfort and console us, strengthen us in hope, and give us the wisdom and courage to work tirelessly for a world where true peace and love reign among nations and in the hearts of all.

May God give us this grace. Amen.