

Homily for the 24th Sunday of the Year – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
September 12, 2021

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Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated religious, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As I prepared this homily yesterday on September 11, 2021, my mind was very much on the terrorist airplane attacks of twenty years ago on 9-11-2001. 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.

When Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?", Peter was the first to reply, "You are the Christ." But Peter did not fully understand what that meant, as he tried to dissuade Jesus from His suffering and cross. Jesus was quick to reject this temptation, telling Peter, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." Jesus added, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it" (Mk 8:27-35). As we read in the Letter of St. James, "faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (Jas 2:14-18). Thus, to be true Christians, we must put our faith into practice in our actions and in the way we treat other people.

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:

"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.