

**Homily for the Memorial Day Field Mass**

**Calvary Cemetery  
Springfield, IL**

**May 30, 2022**

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Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated religious, esteemed members of the military, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we gather again in person here at Calvary Cemetery for our Memorial Day Field Mass. It has been four years since I celebrated this Memorial Day Field Mass at Calvary Cemetery. In 2019, I celebrated the Memorial Day Field Mass at Resurrection Cemetery in Justice, Illinois, where my mother had been buried just two months previously. In 2020, our Memorial Day Field Mass was cancelled due to the outbreak of the COVID pandemic. Last year, we had our Memorial Day Mass at our Cathedral in Springfield. So it is indeed good to come here to continue a tradition on this holiday that has become an important part of our national identity, as we commemorate the sacrifices of those men and women who gave the ultimate sacrifice of their lives in defense of our freedom.

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, an association of Union veterans, 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. On the first Decoration Day, children orphaned by the Civil War placed flowers on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers. In this, we see very clearly that in the eyes of God we are all equals. Similar observances and customs had already been held throughout the nation the previous two years.

Standing at Gettysburg in 1863, President Lincoln set before us the way to honor the fallen members of our nation's military. He suggested "that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain - that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."<sup>1</sup>

Today our hearts are heavy with the sadness of war in Ukraine and the grief of loss from the senseless violence of the recent shootings of innocent people, children as well as adults, in Buffalo and Texas. Less than a year ago,

the United States Armed Forces completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021, marking the end of the 20-year long war in Afghanistan, during which over 2,300 United States troops were killed and more than 20,000 were injured.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, our hearts are also filled with hope in God, “who in His great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by the power of God are safeguarded through faith, to a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the final time” (1 Peter 1:3-5).

Yesterday we celebrated the Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord. The essence of the significance of the Ascension for us is found in the Opening Prayer for the Mass of the Ascension, in which the celebrant prays, “Gladden us with holy joys, almighty God, and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving, for the Ascension of Christ your Son is our exaltation, and, where the Head has gone before us in glory, the Body is called to follow in hope.” The Church is the Body of Christ, and it is Christ who is Head of the Body. As Christ the Head has gone before us to heaven, He awaits us, His

Body, to follow Him there in hope. He also tells us how to get there, namely, through repentance for our sins and by following God's commandments.<sup>3</sup>

This coming Sunday is the feast of Pentecost, which may be understood as the birthday of the Church, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples. This gift transformed them from fearful persons to courageous, fearless persons who faced persecution and martyrdom. Before the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they deserted Jesus and denied him. After receiving the Holy Spirit, Scripture says they boldly preached and converted 3,000 people in a single day!

In our first reading (Acts 19:1-8), Paul lays hands on the newly baptized, and "the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied." They were transformed by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth "who will guide you to all truth."

The same Spirit that emboldened the disciples dwells in us. The Holy Spirit is God's life in us. Imagine: the eternal God living in us, working through us, loving us, inspiring us, strengthening us as the body of Christ!

It is difficult to comprehend the magnitude of this indwelling. Through Baptism and Confirmation, we have the same gifts available that were given at Pentecost. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are: wisdom,

understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.<sup>4</sup> These gifts are for our spiritual growth. We also receive the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity.<sup>5</sup> These fruits, like fruit on a tree, are meant to feed us. These fruits of the Holy Spirit feed us spiritually.

In our Gospel (John 16:29-33), Jesus says: “In the world you will have trouble, but take courage. I have overcome the world.” It is the Holy Spirit who helps us to persevere and grow in holiness. We pray: “Come, Holy Spirit. Fill the hearts of your faithful.”

It is the Holy Spirit who fills our hearts with hope in the promise of the resurrection, a hope that has brought us here today to honor our beloved dead and to decorate their graves. We gather not only to honor them, but – more importantly – to implore the Lord’s mercy upon them, that he might find their faith genuine and admit them into his kingdom.

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord. And let perpetual light shine upon them. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> President Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*, November 19, 1863.

<sup>2</sup> <https://kdvr.com/news/local/u-s-military-deaths-from-afghanistan-over-2300-nationally-and-38-coloradans/>; <https://nypost.com/2021/08/31/the-cost-of-the-afghanistan-war-lives-money-and-equipment-lost/>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Luke 24:46-53.

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1831.

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1832.