

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

**May 27, 2013**

**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, it is good to recall the history of this national holiday established to honor those men and women who gave the ultimate sacrifice 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.

During the Civil War, America was blessed with a President, Abraham Lincoln, a lawyer from Illinois, who possessed the moral vision and courage to end slavery and grant legal status to the former slaves and indeed to all people of African descent as persons with full legal rights promised by the Declaration of Independence and protected by the United States Constitution.

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>

So important is this day to the good of the nation that it is enshrined in the United States Code, where it states that "the President is requested to issue each year a proclamation calling on the people of the United States to observe Memorial Day by praying, according to their individual religious faith, for permanent peace."<sup>2</sup>

In his “Presidential Proclamation – Prayer for Peace, Memorial Day, 2013,” President Obama said: “Scripture teaches us that ‘greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’ On Memorial Day, we remember those we have lost not only for what they fought for, but who they were: proud Americans, often far too young, guided by deep and abiding love for their families, for each other, and for this country. Our debt to them is one we can never fully repay. But we can honor their sacrifice and strive to be a Nation equal to their example. . . . Above all, we can honor those we have lost by living up to the ideals they died defending. It is our charge to preserve liberty, to advance justice, and to sow the seeds of peace.”<sup>3</sup>

Genuine peace is truly a gift. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, whom I was privileged to serve as his Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Chicago until his death in 1996, wrote a beautiful book called, *The Gift of Peace*. In the final chapter that he concluded just days before he died from pancreatic cancer, Cardinal Bernardin wrote: “Many people have asked me to tell them about heaven and the afterlife. I sometimes smile at the request because I do not know any more than they do. Yet, when one young man asked if I looked forward to being united with God and all those who have gone before me, I

made a connection to . . . the first time I traveled with my mother and sister to my parents' homeland of Tonadico di Primiero, in northern Italy: I felt as if I had been there before. After years of looking through my mother's photo albums, I knew the mountains, the land, the houses, the people. As soon as we entered the valley, I said, 'My God, I know this place. I am home.' Somehow I think crossing from this life into eternal life will be similar. I will be home."<sup>4</sup>

It is this hope in the promise of eternal life 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 the peace of his kingdom, where they will finally be at home.

Cardinal Bernardin ended his book at the end of his life by saying that he "would like to leave behind a simple prayer that each of you may find what I have found - God's special gift to us all: the gift of peace. When we are at peace, we find freedom to be most fully who we are, even in the worst of times. We let go of what is nonessential and embrace what is essential. We empty ourselves so that God may work more fully within us. And we become instruments in the hands of the Lord."<sup>5</sup>

He then concluded by inviting his readers to recite together the Prayer for Peace, attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, which I now invite you to pray with me:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,*

*Where there is hatred, let me sow love;*

*Where there is injury, pardon;*

*Where there is doubt, faith;*

*Where there is despair, hope;*

*Where there is darkness, light;*

*Where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master,*

*grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;*

*to be understood, as to understand;*

*to be loved, as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive.*

*It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,*

*and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*

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> 36 USC § 116. Available at <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/36/116>. Accessed May 26, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> President Barack Obama, "Presidential Proclamation, Prayer for Peace, Memorial Day, 2013," May 24, 2013. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/24/presidential-proclamation-prayer-peace-memorial-day-2013>. Accessed May 26, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997), 152.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, pp. 152-153.