

**Homily for Palm Sunday
March 20, 2016**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

When I was doing my graduate studies in Rome, I used to celebrate Mass once a month for the Missionaries of Charity, the religious community founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The Sisters lived at the Convent of San Gregorio, located behind the Colosseum. The Mass was at 6:30 on Saturday morning, a time when there were no tourists on the streets, so I would have the scenery to myself as I walked from the Casa Santa Maria, the residence for priests in their graduate studies at the Pontifical North American College, past the ruins of the ancient Roman Forum and the Colosseum. The Mass was in English, since most of the Sisters were from India, England and North America. The convent was simple and the chapel was a very plain room, with the Sisters wearing their distinctive white habits with their blue-trimmed veils. There were no pews or chairs, so the Sisters sat barefoot on the floor.

One time when I was celebrating Mass there for the Sisters, I noticed a small figure huddled next to the potbelly stove in the back corner of the room. As I looked at this nun, I realized that it was Mother Teresa herself! After Mass, Mother Teresa came to the sacristy to say hello and to thank me for celebrating Mass for her and her Sisters! So I can now say that in my lifetime I will have met two canonized saints, since Pope Francis announced earlier this month that Mother Teresa will be canonized a saint this year on September 4th in Rome. The other canonized saint that I met in my lifetime was Pope Saint John Paul II, whom I met on several occasions in Rome. These two outstanding saints provide wonderful examples of holiness for us to imitate.

The other news involving the Missionaries of Charity earlier this month was quite tragic: four Missionaries of Charity along with twelve other people were killed by terrorists of the Islamic State at a nursing home where the Sisters served in Yemen. They have been identified as Sr. Anselm from India, Sr. Margherite from Rwanda, Sr. Reginette from Rwanda, and Sr. Judith from Kenya. It is possible that some of them may have been among the Missionaries of Charity for whom I celebrated Mass in Rome. Bishop Paul Hinder, who oversees the area of the nursing home

in Yemen, said he has no doubt they died as martyrs. “For me there is no doubt that the sisters have been victims of hatred – hatred against our faith. The Missionaries of Charity died as martyrs: as martyrs of charity, as martyrs because they witnessed Christ and shared the lot of Jesus on the Cross.”¹

Pope Francis has denounced the killings as “diabolical” and lamented the world’s indifference to terrorist attacks such as these.² This past March 17th United States Secretary of State John Kerry finally designated the killing of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East as genocide.³ In light of such evil, we may be inclined to cry out, as Jesus did from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”⁴ We may feel that way whenever we experience something bad in our personal lives, such as sickness or the death of a loved one, or in society, such as terrorist attacks or abortion or the attempt to redefine marriage legally. Why does God let such evils occur? We may feel forsaken and indeed cry out, “My God my God, why have you abandoned me?”

These words are taken from the opening line of Psalm 22, so it is important to read the entire psalm. The final section Psalm 22 is an expression of trust in God and praise for the Lord.⁵

So how do we get from feeling abandoned by God to expressions of praise for God's goodness? The answer, I believe, comes from another line that Jesus uttered from the cross: when the "good thief" crucified along with Jesus asked the Lord to remember him when He came into His kingdom, Jesus replied, "This day you will be with me in Paradise."⁶ Jesus has mercy on all the faithful in their agony with the promise of a better life, eternal life in God's love.

During this Holy Week, as we move through the events of Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday and Good Friday to the joy of Easter, we recall that Christ's death on the cross was not the last word, but His resurrection enables us to look to the future with hope, beyond the failures, pains and disappointments of this world, to the everlasting happiness of eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/theres-no-question-the-missionaries-of-charity-died-as-martyrs-52544/>.

² <http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2016/four-missionaries-of-charity-reported-killed-in-yemen.cfm>

³ <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/03/254782.htm>

⁴ Matthew 27:46.

⁵ Psalm 22:23-32.

⁶ Luke 23:43.