

Homily for the Memorial Day Field Mass

**Calvary Cemetery
Springfield, IL**

May 29, 2017

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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, as we gather for our annual Memorial Day Mass here at Calvary Cemetery, we continue a tradition that has become an important part of our national identity as we commemorate the sacrifices of those men and women who died in order to secure the freedom which we enjoy today.

The origins of this national day of prayer are found following the conclusion of the Civil War. In 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic, Major General John A. Logan, began what was called Decoration Day. Decoration Day was set aside as a day to honor those who had given the ultimate sacrifice in battle, their very lives, by decorating their graves with flowers. General Logan said the following regarding this practice of remembrance and respect:

We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. ... Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic.¹

As Catholics, this respect for the deceased is not a foreign concept; rather, it has been central to the practice of the Church since its very beginning. While the exact rite for the funeral and burial of the faithful has evolved through the ages, the core of the Catholic mourning practices remains focused on the celebration of the Mass of Christian Burial as the Church's final way of assisting the deceased in their journey to their heavenly reward. As a matter of fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states the following regarding Christian Funerals:

The Church who, as Mother, has borne the Christian sacramentally in her womb during his earthly pilgrimage, accompanies him at his journey's end, in order to surrender him "into the Father's hands." She offers to the Father, in Christ, the child of his grace, and she commits to the earth, in hope, the seed of the body that will rise in glory. This offering is fully celebrated in the Eucharistic sacrifice.²

On this day where we gather to continue the tradition of honoring those who have died serving their country, I urge you that, in the midst of

a time that places less and less value on traditional mourning practices, you not lose sight of the important role that the funeral Mass and Christian Burial plays in our lives as Catholics. For as people of faith we see death not as a wall where life ends, rather we see it as a gate that links the world in which we live on earth to the heavenly reality in which we aspire to live eternally.

In our Gospel today, we heard the conclusion of the Last Supper Discourse, in which our Lord prefigures the betrayal He would face on the part of His disciples as He entered into His passion and death. Even though we know that the disciples for the most part fled and abandoned Him, Jesus was not left alone, because the Father was with Him even in these most trying times. So too is our heavenly Father with us during the trying times in our lives. God is ever present to us through the liturgy of the Eucharist in which the Father gives us His Beloved Son, who suffered and died in order that we might not suffer a final death, but rather be worthy of resurrection to life in Him. Let us not be like the disciples who abandoned the Lord during trying times, and may we always remember that our Lord loves us as His adopted sons and daughters, and has given us the Church to assist us in our lives of faith.

Thus, may our observance of this Memorial Day be an opportunity for us not just to remember those who have died for our country, but may we truly give back to them in the most effective and powerful way possible, by offering our prayers for them, especially as we commend them to God's mercy in this most perfect prayer of the Mass, whereby Christ conquered sin and death, so that we might be reunited with Him and all of our beloved dead in the glory of eternal life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, "Memorial Day History," www.va.gov.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1683.