

**Memorial Day Mass at Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

May 31, 2021

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacon, consecrated religious, esteemed veterans of the military, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here for our annual Memorial Day Mass, during which we remember the sacrifices made by those who fought to defend the freedoms which we enjoy. We ask God to grant eternal rest to their souls, as we also pray that the fruits of their efforts might bring about greater peace in our country and in our world.

Our annual Memorial Day Mass usually takes place in a cemetery. Technically, we have a cemetery right here in the sanctuary of our Cathedral! There are four people buried here in crypts below the sanctuary floor: Bishop James Aloysius Griffin, who built this Cathedral in 1928 and died on August 5, 1948, is buried behind the Altar of Sacrifice; Bishop William O'Connor, who died on November 14, 1983, is buried to the left of the altar as you are looking at the sanctuary; Bishop Joseph McNicholas, who died on April 17, 1983, is buried to the right of the altar; and Father Timothy Hickey, who

served as Vicar General of our Diocese from 1889 to 1924, is buried at the back of the left side of the sanctuary. He died on October 20, 1926. Bishop Griffin celebrated the Requiem Mass at Old St. Mary's Cathedral with 2,000 people in the church while another thousand were outside. His remains were transferred to the new Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception here on October 16, 1928, two days after this Cathedral was dedicated. We pray for the repose of their souls today as well.

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, led by 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

One of the most famous Civil War monuments is Gettysburg National Cemetery. Aside from it being the final resting place for thousands of soldiers who died in the Battle of Gettysburg, it was also the site of President Abraham Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address. In that address, the President spoke about the obligation of those who remained "to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here, have, thus far, so nobly advanced."² Among the ideals for which the Union soldiers fought was the abolition of slavery which they saw as being opposed to the founding principles of the country that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."³

Many Americans likely assume that Gettysburg National Cemetery contains the remains of all of the soldiers who died in the battle that took place there. In reality, it is only the Union Soldiers who died fighting to preserve these rights of humanity that are buried there. The Confederate casualties were taken and buried in various cemeteries throughout the south. This fact, however, should not seem too surprising, given that the Civil War was still raging and to try to commemorate a cemetery which

included war dead from both sides would only have resulted in more bloodshed and greater casualties.

As people of faith, however, this division even after death should give us pause. While we remember the lives of those who died to secure our freedom in the Civil War, and indeed in every war fought by American soldiers, what should our attitude be toward those who opposed us?

In his Second Inaugural Address, Springfield's most famous citizen, Abraham Lincoln, said with regard to the two sides embroiled in the Civil War in the 1860's, "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully."⁴

Reflecting on this attitude of Mr. Lincoln, the Reverend Matthew Simpson, one of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in his *Funeral Address Delivered at the Burial of President Lincoln, May 4, 1865*, at the Methodist Episcopal Church here in Springfield, related the following conversation between President Lincoln and a minister who said he hoped the Lord was on our side during the Civil War. Mr. Lincoln was said to have replied "that it gave him no concern whether the Lord was on our side or not, 'For,' he added, 'I know the Lord is always on the side of right;' and

with deep feeling added, 'But God is my witness that it is my constant anxiety and prayer that both myself and this nation should be on the Lord's side.'"5

Thus it is fitting that we approach the Lord in this Memorial Day Mass, praying that our all of actions be in accord with the divine will. The Holy Spirit shows no partiality, distributing His graces to everyone who seeks them with sincerity and an open heart.

The Gospel that we just heard from St. John comes from what are called the Last Supper Discourses that Jesus makes with His disciples on the eve of His Passion. After washing their feet and commanding them to show their love for others by their lives of service, Jesus tells them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." Thomas said to him, "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus replied, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14-1-6).

He desires for us to be united with Him in the relationship that He has with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This unity that He desires is not just with Him, but with one another, for as He says in His prayer at the end of the Last

Supper, “so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us” (John 17:21).

Jesus desires unity among humanity, and few things bring about greater disunity than war. While the reasons for engaging in war may be justified at times, we cannot ignore the divisive effects of war, both during and after war. On this matter, Jesus reminds us of our obligation to “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). This commandment applies to both the living and the dead.

This truly is a radical commandment that the Lord gives to us. For those who have never fought in war, we find it hard to appreciate just how difficult it is to pray for an enemy who has done some horrific things. Many soldiers who have faced terrible suffering or witnessed extreme brutality find it nearly impossible to ask God’s mercy upon those enemies.

Yet, that is what we are called to do as Christians. We cannot pick and choose those for whom we pray in life or in death. Since it is the Lord’s will for “all men to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4), if we truly mean the words: “thy will be done” (Matthew 6:10), then we need to desire that even our enemies be shown God’s mercy in the hopes that we will all be united with one another one day in Heaven.

As I said, for those who have lived through the tragedy of war, this seems inconceivable and indeed impossible. Therefore, it is important for us to include them in our prayers, that their hearts may be opened to ask God to forgive those “who have trespassed against us” (Matthew 6:12). This is not to downplay the severity of the sins that have been committed, but it is an acknowledgment of the infinite mercy of our Lord and that He alone is the Judge, one who desires for all to be with Him in eternity.

On this Memorial Day, as we rightly pray for the repose of those who have died *for* us, let us also pray for the repose of the souls of those who have died while fighting *against* us. Just as President Lincoln urged the living to advance the work begun by those who had died defending freedom, let us dedicate ourselves to continuing the work that the Lord has begun in His death, the reconciliation of *all* mankind to one another and Himself in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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

² President Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*, November 19, 1863.

³ *Declaration of Independence*, July 4, 1776.

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *Abraham Lincoln's Speeches and Writings*, vol. II (New York: The Library of America, 1991), p. 687.

⁵ Reverend Matthew Simpson, D.D., *Funeral Address Delivered at the Burial of President Lincoln*, May 4, 1865 (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1865), p. 16; retrieved May 17, 2016 at <http://beck.library.emory.edu/lincoln/sermon.php?id=simpson.001>.