

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

May 25, 2015

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated men and women, esteemed members of the military, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: in 1861, President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation that granted the United States Navy the ability to confer a special decoration to recognize and honor distinguished naval service. Similar legislation was passed a year later for the Army. This special mark of distinction is known today as the Medal of Honor and it is the highest military honor that can be received. It is awarded by the President, in the name of Congress, to a member of the armed forces who “distinguishes himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.”¹

Since World War II, more than 60 percent of the Medals of Honor have been awarded posthumously, showing that, in many cases, those brave acts of valor took place at the expense of the ultimate sacrifice of their lives for the country that they so proudly served.

This past Saturday marked the 64th anniversary of the death of one of those who received the Medal of Honor in recognition for the heroic service that he provided for our country. This young man of thirty-five had grown up in a small town in east central Kansas. He had served in the China-Burma-India Theatre of World War II and desired to serve his country once again as she went to war in Korea. While serving there, he was captured and placed in a Prisoner of War camp. While there, he regularly risked his life in his efforts to tend to the sick and wounded, often stealing rations to feed those who were suffering. He also did his best to encourage the prisoners in the bleak circumstances in which they found themselves.

After suffering a blood clot in his leg, he was taken to a so-called hospital for recovery. His fellow prisoners knew that few men ever returned from that place, as it was a place where men were sent to die. And so he did, succumbing to malnutrition and starvation.²

While every story behind a Medal of Honor is extraordinary, there is one detail of this story that stands out as being particularly unique. This man was no ordinary soldier, he was a chaplain for the U.S. Army and a Roman Catholic priest. His name is Father Emil Kapaun and he was a

priest of the Diocese of Wichita in Kansas, the home of one of our very own priests, Bishop Carl Kemme.

As you may be aware, the Diocese of Wichita is also well-known for their embracing of a stewardship way of life in which the faithful seek to be generous in sharing the gifts that the Lord has given to them. Father Kapaun is held up in that diocese as a model of one who practiced stewardship in an exceptional way as he sought to combine the love of his faith with the love of his country. His final act of stewardship was his greatest, as he gave the very gift of his life for the country and Church that he loved.

Today, as our country observes this Memorial Day holiday, we pause to remember all of those who made that ultimate sacrifice in their service for our country and the ideals for which she stands. While it is certainly true that not all of those whom we honor today were as motivated by their faith as was Father Kapaun, their example still invites us to consider the characteristics of their lives that are also at the heart of the life of Christian discipleship and stewardship to which the Lord calls each of us.

One of those characteristics is a selflessness in which the needs of others are placed ahead of our own. Such a mindset requires sacrifice on

many levels, from the day to day acceptance of inconveniences to the heroic sacrifice of suffering and even dying for another person. In a recent interview marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, a veteran of the war reflected on what made his generation so unique and successful. "One word describes the Greatest Generation, two letters, W-E. We," he said. "Everybody did what was best for 'we.'" Unfortunately today there's also a two-letter word that describes most of the current generation (me). If we could get the country to become 'we,' we wouldn't have the problems that we're having."³

As Catholics, this notion of community is at the heart of our identity and should be one of the principle motivators behind our actions. This is expressed in Jesus' double commandment of love for God and love for neighbor. He continues to remind us throughout the Gospel that we are to seek to imitate Him, for He "did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The service of so many people that we recognize today should stir our hearts to recommit ourselves to resisting the desires to be preoccupied with ourselves, our own plans, and our own well-being at the expense of minimizing or even ignoring the good of others. Regardless of how

thankful and reverent we are toward our beloved war dead today, if we are not resolved to fight against a society that is becoming more and more self-centered, our observance of this day is without true significance and ultimately disrespectful to the sacrifices of those whom we honor this day.

President Abraham Lincoln summarized this point well in his famous Gettysburg Address on the occasion of the dedication of a cemetery at the site of one of the most deadly battles of the Civil War. He said the following:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- 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.⁴

These words apply to us as citizens of this country, and they also apply to us as members of the Body of Christ which is the Church. The sacrifices of others for the good of their country and for the good of the Church are models of how we are called to share in that same spirit as we daily strive

to embrace a life of stewardship and discipleship. May the death of those who have embraced these ideals not be in vain as a result of our actions or attitudes. Rather, may we provide for this generation, and for those that follow, our own example of giving of ourselves to others in generosity and love so that the Gospel way of life can continue.

As we continue our Mass, we offer our greatest act of thanksgiving for those who have died for our country as we commend them to God's mercy, that He might welcome them into the gift of eternal life. We also pray that the gift of the Eucharist, which is the greatest sacrifice ever made for man, will strengthen us to persevere in offering the gifts that God has given to us for the building up His Kingdom where we hope to be with Him and all of the saints in Paradise for eternity.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ The National Medal of Honor Museum Foundation, <http://www.mohmuseum.org/>.

² The Father Kapaun Guild, <http://www.frkapaun.org>.

³ Quote from David Scheinhartz in interview with USA Today for May 7, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com>.

⁴ President Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/>.