

**Homily for Pontifical Requiem Mass for Bishop Peter Joseph Baltes
On the 135th Anniversary of His Death
Saints Peter and Paul Proto-Cathedral
Alton, Illinois
March 16, 2021**

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

Eternal Rest Grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. [May his soul, and the souls of the faithful departed, rest in peace.] As we pray these words tonight for the repose of the soul of Bishop Peter Joseph Baltes, the second Bishop of our Diocese, who died 135 years ago on February 15, 1886, we recall having heard these words countless times throughout our lives as Catholics.

Some of the faithful, I know, pray these words as part of their before or after-meal prayers, letting these words echo through the entirety of their day. Some are reminded to whisper them as they drive past cemeteries or hear news of someone's passing. Of course, we hear them at funerals or requiem Masses, as we did at the beginning of this Mass in the dolefully chanted *Requiem aeternam [dona eis; Domine]* and again as glints of hope cascading from the final bars of the *Dies irae*. They will be a final note to the whole liturgy today as the Communion prayer begs perpetual light and peace upon all the

dead and the choir sends a final hymn to God: *In paradisum deducant te Angeli,* those haunting, hopeful, heavenly final words returning a final time: *aeternam habeas requiem.*

Haunting. Why does the thought of death chill us? It seems that whenever we happen to think about death – whether recalling the death of someone who has come before us, especially someone we love and miss, or considering the eventuality of our own demise – we are immediately struck with an urge, really a temptation, to push it out of our mind. There is something haunting, chilling, frightening, even disturbing about the thought of death. Even while we profess our belief in the resurrection, and try to stake our lives on the reality of Christ’s bodily victory over death and promise that one day our bodies too will be alive in heaven ... Even with that faith, the thought of death is one that we do not often let stay in our mind for long.

Perhaps we fear the gut-wrenching emptiness of mourning the loss of a loved one, or recoil from the morbid or macabre images that spring to mind having seen those close to us pass through the often-painful transition from this life into the next. We often even more quickly retreat from considering our own finality. The saintly practice of *memento mori* brings the thought of

death alarmingly close to home and as something that will mark our own future.

Most all of us, I am sure, have seen our own bodies growing older and perhaps we fear what the coming years will hold, what gifts and faculties we will slowly, or quickly, lose, and the hardships and loneliness that could await us at the end of our days. Will our lives have meaning? Will we be able to bear any possible pain or loss with confidence and love? Will others be there for us ... or will we become a burden upon them? If all this seems rather somber; it should be, for **Man was not made for death.**

[... *pause to let that sink in.*]

Yes, man was not made for death, that is why we recoil from it. And yet, just by considering death, just by letting the thought rest in our mind for more than an instant, we have already allowed a bit of light to shine upon it. The moment we reflect upon it another truth manifests itself: **man is the only creature able to contemplate death.** No other lower creature has the rational capacity to step back and evaluate their own mortality, and the ranks of the angels far above us do not face bodily death as a consequence for their sins. Thus, *only* man can *face* his own death, and *choose* how to approach it.

Of course, if we avoid the thought of death, we not only *do not* avoid death, we also choose either to crash unthinkingly into it (as do the animals), or perhaps we convince ourselves that we are somehow exempt from it (as are the angels) and find out the hard way that we are not.

No, the best course of action is to face death squarely, and as soon as we do, the first ray of eternity breaks through the darkness: if we can *face* death, the deepest reason we fear it – that we will lose meaning, freedom, love, hope, etc. – begins to evaporate. For death is inevitable, but even the specter of our mortality cannot rip from us our dignity.

Death cannot steal from us our rationality. Death cannot negate our being made in God's image. And death cannot extinguish our destiny of eternal life with God. If we truly believe this, we can taunt with St. Paul, "O death, where is your sting?"¹

Of course, death still frightens, but we have the choice to face it, to consider it, and there to rediscover our sonship even in the face of it.

First, haunting. But now **Hopeful**. Where do we find hope in the midst of death? We can *only* find it in the One who goes before us *through* death and transforms it from a consequence of sin *into* a passageway through this time into eternity. Only God can take the darkest consequences of our rejection of

Him, the worst marring of His beautiful and good creation, and use it as a means to reconquer His world and set it aright.

“Death is swallowed up in victory,” to further recall the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians.² Where is this victory found? “Thanks be to God, who hath given us the victory *through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”³ It is one thing to have reassurance in the face of death because of our identity as sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. But, in a certain way, our forefathers in the Old Testament had that glimmer of hope, and yet death remained unanswered, and their hope remained dim. No, our God is the God of the living, and our God has sent His Son to give the final word on human death, and His is a word of *hope*.

“Amen, amen, I say unto you” Jesus proclaims authoritatively, “that the hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself, so he hath given to the Son also to have life in himself; and he hath given power to do judgment because he is the Son of man.”⁴ Hope is never just optimism. Nor can true, Christian, hope remain simply a positive perspective that entrusts the future to God. The Catechism tells us: “Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our

happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit."⁵

Jesus directed the disciples of His own day towards the first half of his definition when He promises "they that have done good things shall come forth unto the resurrection of life,"⁶ and he reminds us of the second half - of relying not on our own strength but the grace of the Holy Spirit - when He announces that He not only has God's life within Him, but He also has the authority to judge.

Hope is not real hope if we remain in fear of Christ's final judgement; it is empty, earthly, and ephemeral. Do we allow the world to tell us how to respond to sin? To ignore it, to cancel it, to tolerate its presence in our own hearts? Or do we listen to Satan's constant lure:

"You won't die."

"God is out to get you."

"There is no way out."

"God won't forgive you."

Or, do we put our hope in the hands of Jesus, our merciful judge? Yes, "they that have done evil [shall go forth] unto the resurrection of judgment,"⁷

but Christ offers us unending mercy and complete forgiveness, if only we turn to Him in our sin and shame.

The secret prayer today sums all this up: “Grant us, we beseech thee, O Lord, that the soul of thy servant Bishop Peter Joseph may be aided by this oblation; whereby thou didst vouchsafe to loose the sins of the whole world.” As we approach the altar today, let us surrender ourselves – sin and all – to this oblation of our salvation. Here, and only here, do we find true hope.

Haunting, hopeful, **heavenly**. There is a final piece to our Christian evaluation of death, and it appears when we return to the place where we began: *Requiem aeternam*, eternal rest. Perhaps the discovery of our divine identity, and then Christ’s promise of hope and victory, in the face of death, already offer us even here and now a taste of God’s *rest*. But our longing for *rest* is unfulfilled until it acquires that second attribute of *eternity*. Earthly rest, even at its highest pitch, is passing and incomplete. It comes and goes, it recedes when worries and stresses press upon us, it returns when we have time and peace. But we do not seek earthly rest. As a beautiful prayer often attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola says: “Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve to be served, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not

to heed the wounds, *to toil and not to seek for rest*, to labor and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do your holy will.”⁸

Jesus tells us all, “Come to me all who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart.”⁹ He promises us rest, but *only in being yoked to Him*. God’s kind of rest is not lack-of-work – it is not a day-off or down-time – it is found in union with Him, and that is something that we can, and must, begin now, and should be our highest hope for our eventual life in heaven.

This kind of rest is found in discovering that all our work now can be united to Christ, and that by choosing *humility* in the face of the daily toil, we catch a glimpse here and now of eternity peeking through the ordinary tasks that await us today. Give us rest Lord, but nothing less than *eternal rest*. Give us help Lord, but only the help that will carry us to *heaven*.

Haunting, hopeful, heavenly. We choose today to undermine the haunting face of death by facing it squarely: we recall the life and death of Bishop Baltes, we wear black vestments, and we chant the hymns and psalms of mourning and intercession. In all these things we choose to consider death, and our own death, and we discover our dignity as sons and daughters of God when we do it. But our choice goes further: we choose today *Christian*

hope by placing our own sins before Christ, enacting our belief that only He can free us from them and save us from death. And, of course, we choose to keep our eyes *on heaven*. We seek our rest in God, we beseech Him for the gift of eternal rest for Bishop Baltes, and for us when our time comes. Finally, we thank the Lord for His gift of this Mass, this sacrament, and these treasured prayers of the Church. Eternal Rest Grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ 1 Cor. 15:55.

² 1 Cor. 15:54.

³ 1 Cor. 15:57.

⁴ John 5:25-27.

⁵ CCC 1817.

⁶ John 5:29.

⁷ John 5:29.

⁸ [A Mysterious Ignatian Prayer | Thinking Faith: The online journal of the Jesuits in Britain](#)

⁹ Matthew 11:28-30.