

**Homily for the Diocesan Blue Mass for Police and Law Enforcement Officers,
Firefighters, Paramedics, and other First Responders**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
October 1, 2023**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good that we are here to celebrate this Mass with our Cathedral Community as we begin this month of October, observed as Respect Life month. I extend a special welcome to members of the police and law enforcement community, firefighters, paramedics, and other first responders, for whom we pray in this so-called Blue Mass in thanksgiving for their dedicated and self-sacrificing service to our community and to ask for God's blessings and protection in their work. Certainly your work is an integral part of our pro-life efforts. In our efforts to promote respect for human life from conception to natural death, there are many years in between the start and the end of a person's life that rely on the protection and safeguarding of our well-being.

In our second reading today (Phil 2:1-5), Saint Paul tells the Philippians, "Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather,

humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others.” We can readily say that our police and law enforcement personnel, firefighters, paramedics, and other first responders, put these words into practice every day, looking out not for their own interests, but putting the interests and safety of others before their own, even their own lives. For this, we express our gratitude and pray for your protection.

Putting our words into practice is the message that Our Lord gives to us in today’s Gospel (Matthew 21:28–32). The parable of the two sons is unique to Matthew’s Gospel. The story begins by Jesus asking his listeners their opinion regarding two sons and their diverse responses to their Father’s request to go into the vineyard and work. The first son replied that he would not go into the vineyard as his father requested. But later he changed his mind and went. The second son, on the other hand, agreed to go into the vineyard as his father asked but did not do that. Jesus concludes with a simple question: Which of the two sons did his father’s will? The answer is simple: The first son obeyed his father. The entire story and the actions of the two sons are intended to present a lesson in what constitutes authentic obedience, which responds in faith to what God asks us to do.

Like the father in today's Gospel, God gives us the freedom to choose whether to do what He asks us to do. But even if we refuse, God gives us the opportunity to change our minds and do what He asks of us. We call that repentance and conversion.

We see this dynamic in today's first reading (Ezekiel 18:25–28). The prophet Ezekiel says that God will hold a person guilty for the choices made in the present. Such a person cannot presume that past good deeds will excuse him or her from present guilt. What matters is what someone does in the present. Ezekiel states in a previous verse that God takes no satisfaction in the death of the wicked (18:23). God's desire for us is salvation rather than punishment.

The lesson Ezekiel gives here is that the opportunity to choose life is always at hand. The prophet thus challenges the thinking of some people that the deeds of one generation are counted against the next generation. The prophet wants to make clear that this is not God's way. In God's view people are held accountable for their own deeds. The path of life always lies before them; it is not closed because of the sins of a previous generation. Moreover, God even gives us the opportunity to turn away from our sins of the past. Our Lord has given us the Sacrament of Reconciliation in which we confess

our sins, express our contrition and our firm purpose to amend our lives, and receive forgiveness through the absolution imparted by the priest. Then we can get a fresh start, living in obedience to God's commands with the help of His grace.

Just two days ago, on the 29th of September, the Church celebrated the feast day of Saint Michael the Archangel, along with the Archangels Gabriel and Raphael. Saint Michael was a great leader of the angels in the war against Satan and his followers described in the book of Revelation (20:1-3). His name, meaning "Who is like to God?", served as the war-cry of the good angels as they plunged into battle to "fight the dragon." The image of Michael defeating Satan is one of the most popular depictions of the archangel prince. He's often shown with a spear, sword, armor, banner, and/or scales. Michael was known especially for his strength and courage, and many applaud him for his chivalry and determination to boldly fight for justice. Thus, Saint Michael is the patron saint of the Military, Police officers, Firemen, and people who work in dangerous conditions.

For several years now, we have been praying the Prayer to Saint Michael after the end of Mass. The history of this prayer goes back to the 1880's. Pope Leo XIII had just finished celebrating Mass when he stopped

and saw something that shook him to the core: a vision of demonic spirits, gathering on Rome, came alive before him. A further account says the Pope also heard two voices, that of God and Satan. Satan boasted to God that he could “destroy the Church” but asked God for 100 years and more power to do so. God responded, permitting it. After this vision, with a pale and fearful look, Pope Leo XIII immediately composed the Prayer to St. Michael and decreed that it be said after Masses throughout the world.

This practice was discontinued after the Second Vatican Council, but 100 years after Pope Leo wrote his famous prayer, Pope John Paul II asked all Catholics to re-embrace this plea to the Prince of Angels. In 1984, during the International Year of the Family, Pope John Paul II warned that the fate of humanity was in grave danger and, while not ordering a reinstatement of the prayer after Mass, called on Catholics to pray the prayer daily, to overcome the forces of darkness and evil in the world.¹ In 1994, in an *Angelus* talk reflecting on threats against unborn life, Pope John Paul II, again recalled Pope Leo’s prayer, and noted that it is a worthy prayer for protection against evil.² In October of 2018, Pope Francis invoked the Prayer to Saint Michael and suggested it be recited at liturgies.³

I would suggest that police and law enforcement personnel, firefighters, paramedics, and other first responders say the Prayer to Saint Michael every day at the beginning of your work shift. The prayer goes like this:

*St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle.
Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the Devil.
May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou,
O Prince of the heavenly hosts, by the power of God,
thrust into hell Satan, and all the evil spirits,
who wander about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.*

Tomorrow, October 2nd, is the Feast Day of the Guardian Angels. It also behooves police and law enforcement personnel, firefighters, paramedics, and other first responders to invoke their guardian angels. We pray the traditional "Prayer to Your Guardian Angel" in these words:

*Angel of God, my guardian dear,
to whom God's love commits me here,
ever this day be at my side,
to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen.*

Finally, it is in the Eucharist that Jesus comes to us Himself, to dwell in our hearts and to keep us in His loving care.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ “St. John Paul II asked us to return to the Prayer to St. Michael,” *Aleteia*, first published on January 30, 2017; updated on August 8, 2023. Accessed online at: <https://aleteia.org/2017/01/30/did-you-know-that-pope-john-paul-ii-asked-us-to-return-of-the-prayer-to-saint-michael/>.

² Sr. Jeana Visel, OSB, “Popular Piety Spotlight: Prayers to St. Michael,” *Pray Tell Blog*, posted September 29, 2020, online at <https://praytellig.com/index.php/2020/09/29/popular-piety-spotlight-prayers-to-st-michael/>.

³ Peter Feuerherd, “St. Michael the Archangel is back. (Or at least his prayer is.),” *America Magazine*, April 19, 2021, accessed online at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/04/19/st-michael-archangel-prayer-pope-francis-sex-abuse-240433>.