

Homily for the Memorial Day Field Mass

**Calvary Cemetery
Springfield, IL**

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Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated men and women, esteemed members and veterans of the military, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here to celebrate our annual Memorial Day Field Mass.

The word “memorial” comes from the Latin word “*memorare*,” which means “to remember.” So Memorial Day is a day set aside to remember the men and women those who died in active military service. Although we gather for this Mass in a cemetery, it is not traditionally a day for praying for all the dead; we do that on All Souls Day, November 2nd.

It is good each year to recall the origins of this national day of prayer, which are found after the conclusion of the Civil War. In 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic, an association of Union veterans, began what was called Decoration Day. Decoration Day was set aside as a day to honor the war dead by decorating their graves with flowers. On the first Decoration

Day, children orphaned by the Civil War placed flowers on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers. In this, we see very clearly that in the eyes of God we are all equals. Similar observances and customs had already been held throughout the nation the previous two years. Major General John Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic 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 has been central to the practice of the Church since its very beginning. Our first reading today from the First Letter of Saint Peter reminds us that God “in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” Although now for a little while we may have to suffer through various trials in this life, we rejoice as we seek to attain the goal of our faith: the salvation of our souls (1 Peter 1:3-9). How do we attain this goal?

Jesus gives us the answer to that question in today's Gospel passage from Saint Mark. We are to keep the commandments:

You shall not kill;

you shall not commit adultery;

you shall not steal;

you shall not bear false witness;

you shall not defraud;

honor your father and your mother.

That is not all, however. Jesus says we are to give ourselves totally to Him and follow Him. This might seem like an impossible task, but Jesus reminds us that "All things are possible for God" (Mk 10:17-27).

In addition to remembering and praying for the souls of the U.S. military personnel who died while serving in the United States Armed Forces, it is good for us to pray for those on the side of justice and right who are dying in the wars that are currently being fought between Russia and Ukraine and between Hamas and Israel. In these wars, one side is the aggressor and the other side is fighting to defend itself. Ukraine is justified in defending itself against the aggression of Russia, which seeks to destroy Ukraine as a sovereign country and make it part of a supposed Russian

empire. Israel is justified in defending itself against the aggression of Hamas, which seeks to destroy the Jewish people and wipe the country of Israel from the face of the earth.

Most people want to live in peace, but what does it really mean to live in peace? The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, said,

Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice. Peace results from that order structured into human society by its divine Founder, and actualized by men as they thirst after ever greater justice. . . . This peace on earth cannot be obtained unless personal well-being is safeguarded and men freely and trustingly share with one another the riches of their inner spirits and their talents. A firm determination to respect other men and peoples and their dignity, as well as the studied practice of brotherhood are absolutely necessary for the establishment of peace. Hence peace is likewise the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide. That earthly peace which arises from love of neighbor symbolizes and results from the peace of

Christ which radiates from God the Father. For by the cross the incarnate Son, the prince of peace reconciled all men with God” (GS 78).

The twentieth century was ravaged by two World Wars. Our nation was also involved in wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. With all the scientific and technological advances that now surround us, it would not have been unreasonable to have hoped that the twenty-first century would move people beyond the barbarities of war to a more civilized world. Sadly, however, the wars currently raging between Russia and Ukraine as well as between Hamas and Israel in Gaza are stark and gruesome reminders that true peace remains painfully elusive.

A cease-fire or truce in these wars would not be true peace, which is the ultimate goal. A temporary cessation of violence and the silencing of weapons will not bring about real peace as long as hatreds and hostilities remain between enemies.

The description of the first Christians in the Acts of the Apostles tells us that the “community of believers was of one heart and mind” as “the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:32-35). The early Christian community had a very simple yet profound

understanding of the model and teachings of Jesus. The mission of the early apostles, including Paul, to spread the Good News was effective in its focus and outreach. Communities of believers sprang up, founded on the work and teachings of Jesus. The spirit of generosity and shared resources was strong in these communities.

The kingdom of God is a place of peace, and Jesus invites the disciples into that place. This kingdom is “at hand,” within us, and it is a source of strength for the journey. Like the first disciples, our mission as Christians sends us out into the world to spread the Good News of Christ’s peace. It is belief in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus that leads to the building up of a community that lives in peace because it shares one mind and one heart.

The Holy Spirit fills our hearts with hope in the promise of the resurrection, a hope that has brought us here today on this Memorial Day. As we honor those brave soldiers who died in the cause of justice and truth, we pray that they may rest in peace for all eternity in God’s Kingdom.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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