

Homily for Memorial Day Mass
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois

May 26, 2025

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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 Mass, which we are doing this year here at our Cathedral instead of at Calvary Cemetery due to the forecast of inclement weather.

It is good each year to recall the origins of this national day of prayer, which came about 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, recognizing our shared humanity even when soldiers fought on opposing sides.

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."¹

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.'"²

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.

Standing at Gettysburg in 1863, President Lincoln set before us the way to honor the fallen members of our nation's military. He suggested "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."³

Memorial Day, as Decoration Day gradually came to be known, originally honored only those lost while fighting in the Civil War. But during World War I the United States found itself embroiled in another major conflict, and the holiday evolved to commemorate American military personnel who died in all wars, including World War II, The Vietnam War, The Korean War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For decades, Memorial Day continued to be observed on May 30, the date General Logan had selected for the first Decoration Day. But in 1968, Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, which established Memorial Day as the last Monday in May in order to create a three-day

weekend for federal employees. The change went into effect in 1971. The same law also declared Memorial Day a federal holiday.⁴

So important is this day to the good of the nation that it is enshrined in the United States Code, where it states that “the President is requested to issue each year a proclamation calling on the people of the United States to observe Memorial Day by praying, according to their individual religious faith, for permanent peace.”⁵

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

² 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>.

³ President Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*, November 19, 1863.

⁴ "History of Memorial Day," <https://www.history.com/articles/memorial-day-history>

⁵ 36 USC § 116. Available at <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/36/116>. Accessed May 26, 2012.