

September 12, 2021 2:00 p.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Annual Blue Mass with Special Recognition of all Front Line Workers

Beginning of Mass Words of Welcome:

- It's a great joy and privilege to welcome you here to St. Augustine Cathedral on this beautiful September afternoon.
- In our Liturgical Calendar, we are celebrating the "24th Sunday in Ordinary Time" today. In addition, though, we have come together to celebrate our Annual Blue Mass.
- Over these many years, we set the Sunday closest to "9/11" aside to pray for, to pray with, and to give thanks to those in our community who are our "guardians", "protectors"---those who keep us safe---those who set their own needs aside at a moment's notice to take care of others in distress.
- I welcome all our "First Responders"----our Public Safety Officers---our Police and Fire Fighters; our EMTs; our Health Care Professionals; and all the members of our Military personnel.
- We also this year want to acknowledge and thank all those who are "Front Line Workers"---those who are so Essential to the health and safety of our daily life.
- In the name of the entire community, I thank all of you for your service, and I'm so pleased that we could come together for this time of prayer as we ask God's continued blessings upon us all.
- And so, let us prepare ourselves....

Homily:

Yesterday was a somber Day of Remembrance in our Country, as all of us, I'm sure, took time to re-live the shock/trauma/horror/disbelief of what took place on that beautiful, sunny/blue-skyed Tuesday morning on September 11, 2001. It was one of those experiences that makes time stand still, and which seers into our minds haunting memories which last forever. We all remember where we were, what we were doing, who we were with. In watching some of the videos replayed so often yesterday, I found that the emotions I was feeling then were just as raw and real as they were 20 years ago.

September 11, 2001 will forever be remembered as a sad and tragic day in our history when more than 3,000 of our fellow human beings violently, cruelly and abruptly had their lives snatched away while they were going about the normal business of living their lives, in the World Trade Center in New York, in the Pentagon in Washington, and on a plane intending to go to San Francisco, but which ended in a field in Shanksville, Pa.

We continue to keep the promise that our nation made then---that "we will never forget"; and all of us renew that promise again today so that we can keep those people alive in our collective memories, and pay special tribute to the more than 400 of the 3,000 + who died who were among the "First Responders". They are the ones who did on that day what they had committed themselves to do anytime a "9-1-1" call came in---to run toward the danger, and to do whatever it takes to help those who are in distress. We honor them today, rightly so, as "heroes"; but, as people of Faith, we might also call them "saints" and "Angels of mercy".

And so every year, as close to the actual anniversary date itself as possible, we celebrate this "Annual Blue Mass" for two purposes: **to pray** for those among us--our Public Safety Officers, Fire Prevention Personnel, EMTs, and Military Service men and women----who put their lives on the line day in and day out to keep the rest of us safe, protected, and secure. We pray during this Mass for God's protection for all of you; we pray for God's Grace to keep you strong; we pray for your spouses and family members, and we thank them for sharing you with the rest of us, which we know is such a great sacrifice for them. And there's no better way for us to pray for, and with you, than through this Celebration of God's Presence among us in His Word and in the Holy Eucharist.

But we also have this Annual Mass for a second reason: **to thank you**---to praise you---to lift you up and let you know that what you do is a powerful gift to this entire community. We are grateful to God, and to you, for being our “heroes”, our “saints”, our “angels of Mercy”.

We didn't get to celebrate our Annual Blue Mass last year because these past 18 months have been extraordinarily challenging as we've all endured this worldwide pandemic, and all the terrible illness from COVID-19, resulting in thousands of deaths, and great suffering by so many among us; we've endured many different kinds of restrictions and lots of inconveniences. But throughout even this worldwide pandemic, our First Responders were joined by another group of too frequently overlooked people among us that we have come to know as “Front Line” and “Essential Workers”----those who still came to work and did what they do so that the rest of us could not only stay safe, but also to feel protected. Our health care professionals lovingly gave medical care to the sick and dying, and went to great lengths to keep the rest of us well; our own Pfizer Corporation, and several others pharmaceutical companies developed and provided the life-saving vaccines, and huge numbers of volunteers helped to provide it to us; to all the many social service agencies throughout our communities who made sure that people in need had the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter; and of course all those who did their jobs that are so essential but which we all too often take for granted---jobs which allowed us to keep food on our tables, gasoline in our cars, and lights on in our homes. And so at this Annual Blue Mass, we also want to **pray for and thank** all those Front Line and Essential Workers among us, and thank you as well for being our “heroes”, and what Pope Francis likes to call “our next door Saints”.

While we promise to “never forget; and to always remember” what happened 20 years ago, we pray every day that there will never be another horrendous experience like that again. But, as we know all too well, we live in a finite, imperfect and sinful world where we experience joys and sorrows, successes and failures, triumphs and tragedies---we celebrate, respect, defend and value the gift of life; we mourn and grieve when death takes life away.

The Word of God we have just heard proclaimed on this **24th Sunday in Ordinary Time** makes it very clear that faithfully following God's ways, abiding by God's commandments, and following the One Who has come into our world to show us the Way, to teach us the Truth, and to bring us the fullness of Life----none of that is easy. Perhaps a better way to say that is following God and God's

ways doesn't come naturally. It requires us to make a basic choice at some point along the way in our lives. We each need to ask ourselves: will I take the path of least resistance, and live according to the standards and "dog-eat-dog" rules of the world; or will I choose to follow the path that God lays out for us, which requires sacrifice, self-denial, and a willingness to suffer for the cause of righteousness?

That's what we heard Isaiah challenged with in today's First Reading----he was being called by God to be God's Servant, which meant that if Isaiah followed God, he'd have to turn his back on those who were very willing to "*beat*" him and "*pluck his beard*" and "*buffet and spit on his face*". Isaiah chose to be God's servant because, as we heard, he was confident that: "*the Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint. He is near who upholds my right.*"

So, if we choose to follow God and live according to God's ways, we can be sure that He will be with us---and therefore we too can be confident that in the big picture, we will receive our reward. However, in our day to day experiences, we can also be sure when we stand up for those being treated unjustly or persecuted for their beliefs, when we do what is right in spite of pressures to go along with the crowd, when we reach out to the poor and those the rest of society sees as unimportant and insignificant, our hearts will break over and over again as we do what we can to alleviate the suffering, mistreatment, and oppression of others.

Jesus told us very clearly in today's Gospel: if you want to follow Me, you need to know exactly what to expect----following Me is not a path of ease and comfort; it will not win you any popularity contests. As Jesus said: "*Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me*"----period! That's why Jesus was so blunt in His criticism of Peter when, just a bit earlier in that same passage, Jesus revealed to His disciples what was awaiting Him in Jerusalem---that He would suffer greatly, be rejected by the religious leaders, be killed and rise after three days. Peter boldly told Jesus that would never happen to Him as long as he was around.

Jesus rebuked Peter and said: "*Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.*" Peter was "out of line"----literally. There is only one Leader, and that's Jesus! The rest are "followers". That's what Jesus was telling Peter----"Get back in line!" You're not the Leader; you are to follow

Me. I will show you the Way---I will teach you the Truth---I will bring you to the fullness of Eternal Life.

So God does not promise us comfort, pleasure, ease; Jesus does not promise us popularity, prestige, power. But when we choose to follow God and God's Ways; when we choose to follow Jesus, willingly deny ourselves, and take up our cross----what we are promised is that we will never be alone.

That was Isaiah's promise: *"The Lord God is my help; I am not afraid"*. And that is what Jesus promises us as well: *"I am with you always, even until the end of the world"*. And the way Jesus remains with us is thru this Mass that we are celebrating together here on this beautiful September afternoon. Even as we are remembering a horrific event in our nation's history----even as we are fully aware that we continue to live in a fragile, imperfect and sinful world----even as it is likely that at some point, there will be some other human suffering, tragedy, grief that we will have to endure; even with all of that, we come together here to celebrate our Faith that assures us that God is with us thru His Word made Flesh--His Son Jesus; and that Jesus remains with us through the Gift of Himself in the Eucharist; and that God the Father and God the Son abide with us always through God the Holy Spirit Who guides the Church, inspires our hearts, and Who continues to show us the way to our ultimate destination---to be with God for all Eternity.

In today's Second Reading, St. James reminded us that "Faith" is so much more than a list of articles of belief in a creed that we believe. "Faith" is rooted in a strong and vibrant relationship with Jesus---a relationship that helps us to "see" others in our lives as Jesus sees us----as those for whom He willingly gave His life on the Cross to bring them the gift of Salvation. And that relationship with Jesus, and that ability to "see" others as brothers and sisters in Christ, will then lead us to love those with whom we interact on a daily basis, and also to do acts of charity to those in need, and to practice the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy for whomever we encounter. Otherwise, as St. James told us: *"If our Faith is not coupled with works, it is dead!"* So we need to not just be "hear-ers" of God's Word, but "do-ers" as well.

Like Peter, each of us needs to know the answer to Jesus' most important question: *"Who do you say that I am?"* If we believe that Jesus *"is the Christ"*, then, with Peter, we also need to "get in line"—stay behind Jesus---and follow Him wherever He leads us. But it remains a choice: will we choose to believe in

God and live according to God's ways, or will we just decide to live in the ways of least resistance, going along to get along? If we choose to follow Jesus, He tells us exactly what we need to do: deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. Jesus has already gone ahead of us, and shown us that the Cross is not the end of the Story---the Cross leads us to Resurrection; the Cross is the doorway to Eternal Life.

While we pray for an end to violence, war, acts of terrorism, and all human sufferings, and as we continue to live in this imperfect world, we know that Evil and the results of Sin will always remain with us.

So, as we promise never to forget "9/11", and to always remember those whose lives were lost, especially those who gave their lives heroically, we take great comfort in knowing that there are "heroes" among us; "every day saints" like our "First Responders" and "Front Line Workers", who are selflessly helping to make our lives more secure.

But even more than that, we need to renew our promise to never forget that our God is with us; He has never abandoned us. With Isaiah we can be confident that "*the Lord God is my help; there is nothing to fear*". Our Loving God is right here with us in the Eucharist we share---in the Gift of Jesus Himself to be our Food for the Journey, and Who will lead us safely Home.

God bless you now and always!