



Blue Mass Homily
A Mass offered for those who give service to their community

The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
September 27, 2013
Memorial Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul
Cathedral of Saint Joseph

Red, white and blue – those are the colors in our country’s flag and that is often a description of those who go beyond their duty to defend freedom, care for others and keep the peace. They are those who assure stability, respect life without questioning and go the extra mile to save and defend our freedoms.

A beautiful tradition has developed to offer red, white and blue Masses. The red mass is in support of government officials and private persons who write and implement the law that justice may be done. We must be a nation of laws or we will not be a nation at all. The white Mass is in support of those in the health care profession who care for those who are sick and seek healing. While health care has become a matter of political controversy, every day the doctors, nurses, technicians, researchers and support staff carry on the healing mission of Christ.

Today in this blue Mass we honor and pray in thanksgiving for those who protect us and serve us in law enforcement and public safety, paid and volunteer. Often called first responders, they are those who protect society and persons with vigilance and then respond with action in times of need. St. Paul in the first reading urges: “consider your calling¹.” For first responders yours is not only a job but a calling.

Catholic social teaching speaks of the common good. “The common good implies that men and women can live in society with freedom, peace and security. To do so requires that the individual and the smaller social unit, (like the family) are protected and promoted by the stronger power of state institutions.²”

That is the role first responders assume; some at the federal level, some at the state level, some at the county and municipal level. Sadly too often we take your courage, your heroism, your sacrifice for granted.

We sit glued to our TVs when tragedies caused by the violence of people or the violence of nature occur. We rightly watch with awe the work of police, firefighters, EMTs, and others who respond immediately and with valor. The daily duty, often unseen yet essential for preserving the common good of freedom, peace and security, should be as noticed and appreciated.

I think of the corrections officer who not only monitors prison or jail life, but also encourages the young men and women to look beyond the moment and prepare to begin anew. I think of the probation officer who not only assures a sentence is complied with but also befriends and gives hope to those placed in his or her care. I think of the police officer who patrols around the Cathedral neighborhood and reaches out to youth by presence and word before trouble occurs. I think of those who must tell a mom or dad that an accident has occurred and their child no longer is alive. I think of the trooper along the Interstate who, by diligence in enforcing the law, prevents more accidents. I think of EMT's who arrive in minutes when minutes can be the difference between life and death. I think of the fire fighters who seek to save people and buildings and to contain the spread of such a destructive force. I think of the officers who lead funeral processions so that the grieving may say goodbye with respect and dignity. I think of all who must put up with false alarms, inhospitable welcomes, and the danger of violence lurking unknown and yet do so with professionalism and courtesy. The list could go on.

I think of those who personally lived out the message of Jesus Christ that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. For first responders everyone, known or not, is in a way a friend to whom the call to duty is necessary and sacred. Remembering the compassion of Jesus for those troubled recorded in the Gospel reading, St. Francis de Sales, whom we remember today said, "We should strive to keep our hearts open to the sufferings and wretchedness of other people, and pray continually that God may grant us that spirit of compassion which is truly the spirit of God." First responders are caked to do so every day.

Allow me to tell of a personal experience that has etched in my mind appreciation and admiration for those who work in law enforcement and public safety who are filled with compassion:

The 150 year old Cathedral of St. Raphael in Madison, Wisconsin was set on fire by an arsonist while I was sleeping in the attached rectory. I rose from bed as usual about 5:30 a.m. and turned on the radio to learn the weather forecast. Instead I heard that a four alarm fire was blazing at St. Raphael Cathedral which is where I was. I threw on some clothes and went outside to see what was going on, thinking it only a minor disturbance. What I encountered was the block surrounded by fire trucks shooting streams of water toward the front of the Cathedral only yards from my bedroom. The police were controlling traffic. The EMTs were there waiting their call if necessary to attend me. As I stood in the coldness of the March dawn it seemed that the fire was localized to the bell tower. I wondered whether I could get into the other end of the church to retrieve the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the Tabernacle. Suddenly there was a swoosh and horrendous orange flames flew down the expanse of the roof. I knew I could not retrieve the Blessed Sacrament. I was saddened and my heart ached.

Some hours later the Madison Cathedral was just a shell; the fire was under control though smoldering continued and small flash fires had to be attended. I asked the chief if we might check to see if the tabernacle was saved. At first there was hesitation and a look that said, it's dangerous in there. But one firefighter overheard, and understanding the importance of what I was asking volunteered to take me in. We went in. Debris had fallen and blocked the view. I pointed out the location of the tabernacle and then at their request withdrew because it was dangerous in there. After a little while, three brave firefighters, in full regalia blackened from their dangerous and courageous work, came walking slowly toward me with great reverence. One carried the large ciborium which contained the Body of Christ consecrated at Holy Mass the night before. It glistened so golden that it

seemed beyond this world. One carried the smaller ciborium in which was the Body of Christ we had bowed down before at Eucharistic Adoration a few days previous. It too glistened a gold that took my breathe away. Earlier I had teared up at the loss of the building. Now I wept for joy at this beautiful sight, at the presence of Our Lord, a gift of hope from those brave first responders. In the midst of ashes and smoke, anxiety and loss, our Lord was with us, our Lord is with us. Out of darkness comes light, in him is our hope.

There is an old saying, “without hope the heart would break.” You in law enforcement and public safety, first responders, by your presence, your courage, your compassion and your response to duty come what may, are messengers of hope as Christ has called you to be. Thank you for who you are and what you do.

May Our Lady of Hope watch over and bless you, you staffs and your families.

¹ – 1 Cor. 1:26-31

² – Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2011