

## **Annual Diocesan “Blue Mass”/24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

September 13, 2015 11:00 a.m. St. Catherine of Siena Parish

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is with great joy that we join together here in beautiful St. Catherine of Siena Parish, on this pleasant Fall September Sunday morning, to offer our praise and worship to our saving God. But in addition to our worship of God for His gift of eternal salvation, we also gather to give thanks to God in a special way for those among us who devote their lives to “saving” others as well---saving us from dangerous and tragic circumstances when they take place---those who at a moment’s notice leave whatever they are doing or whoever they are with when that “9-1-1” call comes in to try to save us from whatever emergency situation that might have arisen for any one of us.

On this Sunday closest to our national observance of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Shanksville, Pa., 14 years ago this past Friday---when in the face of that monumental catastrophe, the heroes of the day, and the many subsequent days and weeks, were the First Responders, we take this occasion as a people of faith to thank all our first responders---our police officers, firefighters, public safety officials, EMT workers and military personnel--- who put their own lives and safety on the line for any and all emergencies in our local communities. And so I would ask that all the First Responders who are here present this morning to please stand so that we can recognize you and offer you our thanks.....May I also take this opportunity to ask the spouses, children and parents of any of our first responders to please stand as well.....We thank you for the many sacrifices you make so that we can be so well protected and so selflessly served.

These are increasingly dangerous times for those who put on any uniform of service, not only for those who protect us on foreign lands, but for those who try to “serve and protect” us right here at home. There have been a growing number of senseless attacks on those dedicated to protect the public; most recently Michigan State Police Officer Chad Wolf was killed in the line of duty from the Detroit area and was recently laid to rest. And so during this Mass, we not only want to thank all of you, but we also pray for all of you, asking God’s protection and blessing to be upon you, even as we continue to ask God to help us bring an end to senseless violence, terrorism, and persecution of any kind throughout the world.

Providentially, the Scripture Readings we've just listened to for this, the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, emphasize the fact that our God IS the Ultimate "first responder"---the one absolutely focused on life-saving! God's focus is not only on our lives in this world, of course, because God's plan focuses on the fact that our human lives are only a fraction of a moment of what He intends our lives to be. Even still, God's desire---God's plan---is that we---the human family---would live together in this world in peace---in harmony---free from the results of sin, which are violence, greed, injustice, and all other inhumane actions. But, beyond that, God intends that we live our lives in such a way in this world that we are ready---open---prepared to choose to live for all eternity with God, rather than to be eternally separated from God.

God loves us so much that He gives us the ability to choose our eternal destiny. God has given us all that we need; He has revealed His life-saving Word; He has sent us His only-begotten Son Jesus Who has won our redemption for us, and our right to eternal salvation in spite of our sinfulness; God has given us the Gift of His Holy Spirit to constantly inspire, encourage, remind, and urge us to live our lives in the ways of God; and finally, God has given us the Church where we can always come to be renewed, reminded, forgiven, nourished and directed in the ways we live our human lives. But the choice is always ours; God does not force anything on us.

That's very much like our first responders---all they can do is come when they are called, but if someone chooses not to be rescued, or saved from their dangerous plight, there is only so much that they can do. And so we heard the prophet Isaiah in this morning's First Reading tell us: *"The Lord God opens my ears that I MAY hear.....the Lord God is my help....therefore I am not disgraced."* The key word there is "may"---the Lord God opens my ears that I may hear. We can, and often do, turn a "deaf ear" to God's Word, a "blind eye" to God's Presence, and a "stiff neck" and a "hard heart" to God's ways. And of course, that is our right; but that is not what God wants---and certainly, that is not what we need.

We heard this morning's Psalm Response also tell us: *"I called upon the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, save my life!'" "....and He saved me."*

And in today's Second Reading, we heard St. James remind all of us that "faith" is so much more than articles or dogmas that we believe; real, living faith means having a strong relationship with Jesus first of all---a relationship that is primary to all our other relationships. And then, it means that we follow Jesus---imitate Him---live our lives like He lived His. And that means that we have to do so much more than give good, kind advice to someone who is in

need, as James says: *If a brother or a sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day.....you can't just say: "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well."* Our Faith in Jesus would demand that we DO something---that we put our faith into action---that we help those in need to find the necessities of life. Otherwise, as James tells us, *"If our faith is not coupled with works, it is dead!"*

That's what our first responders do---they don't just know about public safety, and fire protection, and medical treatment---they don't just put out public safety warnings to the public, or send out texts and post on Facebook about avoiding the dangers of the world around us. No, they are ready to put their training and their knowledge into practice anytime, anywhere, for anyone---no questions asked.

That's what we need to do as people of faith as well. Why? Well, the answer is in today's Gospel passage---one with which we are all so familiar.

Jesus was walking along with His closest followers---training, instructing and preparing them to be His apostles and alerting them to all the sacrifices that would require---and so Jesus asks the "\$64 million question"-----*"Who do people say that I am-----and then, who do YOU say that I am?"* We all know what happened---Peter, possibly the most unlikely one among the 12, was clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit to give the absolutely correct response: "You are the Christ!"---meaning, You are the Holy One of God---You are the Chosen One of God---You are the Messiah of God---the One for Whom the whole world has been waiting and longing for centuries. He obviously didn't realize the enormity of his answer and all the implications of what he said, because as Jesus was explaining what would happen to Him---that He would soon *"suffer greatly, be rejected....be killed and rise after three days"*, Peter tried to "teach the Teacher", which is **never** a good idea at any level.

Jesus, the Teacher, made it very clear to Peter, and all the Apostles, that he was very much out of line when he said: *"Get behind Me, Satan. Quite literally, get back into line where you belong behind me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."*

One of Satan's greatest strategies is trying to "deceive" us---distracting us from what is important and misleading us as to where to go and what choices to make. He's a master at making bad decisions seem right, pleasurable and good. And so Jesus nipped that in the bud immediately.

As people of faith, we are invited to “open our ears” and “hear” what God has to say. Jesus came into the world to “save” us---to redeem our human reality by changing our thinking---converting our ways of living---so that we can live in this world according to God’s ways, and choose to accept his offer of Salvation.

Jesus taught us the key to living and saving our lives: *“Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.....Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, and that of the Gospel, will save it.”*

It’s all about the Mystery of the Cross. That’s where Jesus leads us, because He knows that the Cross isn’t the end of the journey---it leads to Resurrection----it is the doorway to eternal life.

All we have to do is to make sure that we don’t try to “teach the Teacher,” and that we don’t try to get ahead of Jesus. As long as we are behind Jesus and follow Him, He will always lead us to the ways that will save our lives, in this world, and in the life of the world to come.

God bless you, now and always!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley