

## Annual Blue Mass/24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 11, 2016 11:00 a.m. St. Catherine of Siena, Portage

My brother priests and Deacons; dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ. We come together here to beautiful St. Catherine of Siena Parish on this pleasant September Sunday morning from many different places, and representing different faith persuasions, to join together in offering praise and thanks to our Loving and Merciful God.

What also brings us together today is to celebrate our Annual Blue Mass----to pray for those among us who devote their lives to “saving” others from life’s dangerous and tragic circumstances---we come together to honor those who at a moment’s notice and with no second thoughts leave their own comfortable and safe places to be the first responders to whatever the “9-1-1” emergency is-----we come together to express our appreciation, our respect and our admiration to those who are the real-live Guardian Angels who protect **all** of us, God’s daughters and sons living in our local communities.

For the past many years that we have been celebrating this annual Blue Mass, we have tried to schedule it on the Sunday closest to the national observance of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Shanksville, Pa. This year we get to do so on the actual Day of Observance. Fifteen years ago today, on September 11, 2001, we all experienced one of those moments in our collective consciousness that remains as fresh today as it was on that horrific day then. And as the majority of us were left shocked and speechless in the face of what we were seeing and hearing, and as most of us immediately turned to God in prayer, the heroes of that day and throughout the many days, weeks and months that followed, were the First Responders who rushed into the collapsing buildings and into the confusion and chaos to try to save and protect others, with hundreds of those First Responders dying in the process.

And so not just as citizens, but also as People of Faith, we take this occasion to thank and honor those in our communities who are our present-day heroes: our military personnel, police and safety officers, fire fighters, and emergency medical technicians---those who defend, protect, and serve the rest of us here in Portage, Kalamazoo, and all the communities where we live and work throughout the Diocese of Kalamazoo.

Would those among us who are currently serving as any of those “first responders” OR are retired from service in any of those fields of service please stand so that we can see you and offer you our heartfelt thanks and respect.

I also want to recognize our civic leaders and elected officials who are here with us this morning--- Representative Fred Upton, our U.S. Congressional Representative from this District---we are very honored you have joined us; Mayor Peter Strazdas of Portage; other Mayors, Sheriffs/Under Sheriffs, Public Safety Directors or other officials who are here with us this morning. Would you please stand?

And finally, I would like to invite any of the spouses, parents, or children of our First Responders here this morning to also please stand so we can thank **you** for so generously and bravely sharing your loved one with all of us.

Our country changed forever 15 years ago. Perhaps we might have had a fleeting hope that “September 11<sup>th</sup>” was just a terrible nightmare, but one never to be repeated. Unfortunately, as we know, we live with the threat of terrorism every day. And more than that, we are experiencing greater unrest, and increased violence and racial tensions throughout our country. This past summer was awful, beginning on June 7 right here in our own community when nine bicyclists in Kalamazoo were run over by a truck, killing five and badly injuring the other 4, and our First Responders were on the scene immediately, bringing help, comfort, and eventually apprehending the perpetrator. The tragedies continued on June 12<sup>th</sup> in Orlando with the massacre of 49 people, followed in July by multiple violent and racially-charged incidents in Baton Rouge, St. Paul Minnesota, Dallas Texas, again in Baton Rouge, and on July 11<sup>th</sup> here in our own Berrien County Courthouse when two court baliffs were shot and killed while trying to protect the public during an attempted prisoner escape.

We know that our First Responders deal with terribly dangerous situations, not only resulting from accidents, crimes and natural disasters, but increasingly also from those who are blinded by hatred or by misplaced anger who target the very people who are here to protect us all. And so we pray for you----we pray with you----for an end to violence----an end to hatred---an end to intolerance of any sort----and we pray for a renewed determination and a shared sense of hope that we will live together in peace and security. We pray for God’s Grace; we pray for God’s Mercy.

As is pretty obvious, the overarching theme of the Scripture Readings we heard proclaimed just a few moments ago spoke clearly and boldly of God's Mercy.

Our First Reading from the Book of Exodus showed God's People who had turned away from God and God's ways and had become "depraved". The Reading described God as ready to destroy them until Moses intervened and asked God to "remember" who they were----to "remember" the promise He had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob----to "remember" that being violent or revengeful was not What God is all about. And when God "remembered", He also relented and showed Mercy to the people who didn't deserve it, but who desperately needed it.

We heard the same message in the Second Reading from St. Paul's Letter to Timothy. Paul also "remembered" what a terrible sinner he had been----"a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an arrogant sinner", and yet God "treated him mercifully".

And finally, in today's Gospel, the Pharisees and the Scribes were criticizing Jesus because He welcomed and ate with tax collectors and public sinners. What they meant as a criticism, Jesus took as a complement because that is precisely what Jesus came into the world to do: to welcome sinners and eat with them. And, dear brothers and sisters, I would simply invite us to look around and realize that "we are them"! Jesus comes to be with us during this Mass--- during this time of worship---because He knows that we need Him, and we need His mercy. Just as badly as that one lost sheep needed rescuing by the shepherd who was willing to leave the 99 to save the one; just as badly as that one lost coin needed the woman to stop doing everything else and turn her house upside down until she found it. And what happened when the shepherd found the sheep, and the woman found the coin? They threw a party----they called people to "*rejoice and be glad*" because what was lost had been found.

Here this morning, as we join together to give God our worship and praise, we are one. There are no distinctions among us. We are the ones that Jesus longs to be with. And I hope we are here today because we realize that while we don't deserve God's Mercy, we desperately need it.

In many ways, we can see Jesus as the Ultimate "First Responder". Just think about it: In the fullness of time, when the need of the human race for redemption was so great, God sent His only-begotten Son to come among us---to take on our human nature---and to rush headlong into the evil and violence and sin of the world and redeem us from the inside out. Jesus

changed the world through His suffering, death and resurrection which brought us salvation. As Pope Francis has told us so beautifully as he called the whole Church to observe this special Year of Mercy that “Jesus is the Face of the Father’s Mercy”.

Let’s think for a moment about another “First Responder”. She was born in 1910 in Macedonia and named Agnes Bojaxhiu. She felt a calling to religious life and took the religious name “Sister Teresa”. After teaching for several years in Eastern Europe, she was sent to teach in Calcutta. It was the terrible poverty and incredible suffering of her students that led Sister Teresa, who eventually became Mother Teresa, to go out directly to “respond” to the poorest of the poor in the streets, slums and gutters of one of the poorest countries in the world. Mother Teresa captured the attention of the powerful and strong---she met Presidents and Popes, she addressed the United Nations, and she even received the Nobel Peace Prize. But she preferred to live and work among the poor, extending God’s love and mercy to those most in need. Last Sunday in Rome, she was declared a Saint of the Church by Pope Francis, and in his homily for that occasion, he said this: “May this tireless worker of mercy (Saint Mother Teresa) help us increasingly to understand that our only criterion for action is gratuitous love....offered freely to everyone, without distinction of language, culture, race or religion.”

That is what our First Responders do---they are “workers of God’s mercy”----they do what they do out of “gratuitous love”----they are there to help anyone, without asking any questions, just because there is a need.

Whether it’s our First Responders here among us, or Saint Mother Teresa, or the Shepherd looking for the lost sheep or the woman searching for the lost coin----those are all reflections of the selfless and redeeming Love of Jesus who saved us from our sins, not because we deserve it, but because we need it. Just as we affirm that we should “never forget” what happened on September 11, 2001 so as to remain vigilant and prepared to counter those who want to hurt us, even more should we “never forget” how our Loving God wants nothing more than to be One with us, to show us His Mercy, and to help us to live together in Peace. As we pray for an end to conflicts, divisions, violence, and all acts of terrorism----as we work to rid the world of poverty, injustice and any kind of discrimination----as we pray for those among us who are ready to give of themselves for the needs of others----let us “rejoice and be glad” this day because we, who were lost are forever found, and we are held close in our Loving God’s embrace. May we **never forget** how much God loves us; may we always **remember** how much we need the Mercy He longs to give us. God bless you.