

September 16, 2018 11:00 a.m. St. Catherine of Siena Parish

Annual Diocesan “Blue Mass”/24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear sisters and brothers 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 Loving God who saves us.

But even as we give thanks to God for the Gift of Salvation that He has brought about through His Son Jesus, the “Savior of the World”, another focus of our faith-filled “thanksgiving” for this special celebration of our annual “Blue Mass” is on those among us, and throughout our community, who devote their lives to “saving” others. As we gather this morning in thanksgiving to God, the Giver of all Good Gifts, we also thank God for those who, at a moment’s notice, leave whoever they’re with and whatever they’re doing when that “9-1-1” call comes in, to focus on saving others from dangerous and tragic situations no matter what the circumstances

On Tuesday of this past week, I’m sure we all joined together with the rest of the country in somberly remembering the 17th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Shanksville, Pa. Today, as People of Faith, we take the opportunity to honor the more than 3,000 people who died that day, more than 400 of whom were First Responders. During that national tragedy, the Firemen, Police Officers, Emergency Medical Technicians, Health care workers, and Military Personnel were all on the front lines in the midst of that horrific tragedy. No words can express our debt of gratitude. But we’re also keenly aware that day-in and day-out, here in our community, and in every community throughout this country, our First Responders are always on the front line of whatever emergency or dangerous situation is taking place, with very little concern for their own well-being; always focused on helping to save whoever is in whatever dangerous situation.

Today, while words are inadequate to express our gratitude, our prayers and shared worship together help to express what words cannot. We ask God to protect you, to bless you for your selfless acts of kindness and heroism, and to keep you safe.

And so I would ask that all the First Responders who are present here this morning-- Public Safety Officers, EMT/Health Care Workers, Military Personnel, both active and retired---Please Stand so that we can offer you our grateful recognition:.....

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.

Of course we are very mindful that as we are here enjoying a beautiful late-summer Sunday in gorgeous southwest Michigan, that there are many of our fellow citizens dealing with the ravages of Hurricane Florence in the Carolinas and along the Eastern shore. Right in the midst of all of that, of course, are also the First Responders. Let us be sure to pray for those who have died, those who are struggling for survival, and for those who are helping to save lives.

Today's Scripture Readings remind us that God's purpose is always about "saving" us from sin, evil and spiritual death. In that sense, and in keeping with our gratitude to all First Responders, it might help us to see God as the Ultimate "First Responder"! As we know, God's focus isn't only on saving our lives in this world, but also helping us to live our lives in such a way during the X-number of years that we DO live in this world that we live them according to God's ways---so that we are ready, open, and prepared to live for all eternity with God. And, much of that is up to us. God loves us so much that He has created each of us with Free Will, and the ability to choose whether we will live our lives in this world according to God's ways, or not.

God has done all the preliminary work. He's given us everything that we need to make the right choices. 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.

And I would imagine that's very much the experience of our First Responders--all they can do is come when they are called. If someone refuses to be rescued, or doesn't want to be saved from their dangerous plight, there is only so much that they can do. As we all listened to the news reports toward the end of the week as the Monster Hurricane was approaching land-fall in the Carolinas, we were all aware that mandatory evacuation orders were issued by civil authorities, and First Responders were going from door to door telling people to leave. But I was shocked to learn that there were many people who refused to do that, insisting that they would stay on their own. There's not much anyone can do at that point.

In a way, that's what the Prophet Isaiah was telling us in this morning's First Reading: *"The Lord God opens my ears that I MAY hear.....the Lord God is my help."* The key words there are "may" and "help"---the Lord God opens my ears that I may hear; and the Lord God is my help, He will not force us. 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.

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, vibrant 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; it means much more than giving 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!"* Again, that's what our First Responders do----they don't just know what the local and state laws say about public safety; they don't just put out instructions or warnings to avoid fire hazards, or post You-tube videos on Facebook about how to "save yourself" in a dangerous situation. No, they put their training and their knowledge into practice anytime, anywhere, for anyone when they're in danger of any sort---no questions asked, no I-D's required, no "survey" to see if you qualify. That's what we, as People of Faith, need to do as well---to be "hear-ers" and "do-ers" of the Word. And today's Gospel passage helps us to know why that is the case.

Jesus was walking along with His closest followers, and out of the blue, He asks them: *“Who do people say that I am?”* And then, He asks an even more profound and challenging question: *“And YOU, who do YOU say that I am?”* Peter was the one who was bold enough to answer, and said: *“You are the Christ!”*. Jesus not only told him he was right, but went on to give us all the secret to salvation, when He said: *“---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.”* As People of Faith, the answer to how to attain salvation is: to know that Jesus is “the Christ”; and then to follow Him faithfully, wherever He leads.

And that’s why we’re here this morning, to celebrate God’s Presence among us in His Word, and to be nourished by the Gift Jesus gives us of Himself to be our spiritual Food and Drink in this Holy Eucharist. And then, having “opened our ears” to hear how much God loves us, and having professed again our Love for Jesus and our desire to follow Him faithfully, we will return to our normal lives and keep trying to live our lives in God’s ways.

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---the doorway to Eternal Life.

God bless you, now and always!