

September 11th Memorial Mass Homily

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September 11, 2011

My dear friends:

Ten years have passed since the terrorists attacked us. We were taken by surprise. We were shocked. We were wounded. We were grievously wounded. Evil had had its moment of triumph in Lower Manhattan.

This is, therefore, an anniversary that stings and sears the soul. It thrusts us back into an experience of infamy such as none of us would ever have imagined. Thousands of good and decent citizens of Greater New York were brutally murdered. An ugly chasm was dug into the heart of our City; and in the hearts of countless mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, wives and husbands, children and grandchildren, friends and co-workers, there even now aches the nagging pain of loss for persons dearly loved and sorely needed.

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All the same, from the crime of September 11th, 2001, we have learned a powerful lesson that we must never let slip from our memories. It is simply this. When truly challenged, the best of us forget ourselves and become men and women for others, men and women who march into harm's way for others, men and women who are even willing to give up their lives for others.

In a bustling, competitive metropolis like ours, the citizenry can become quite self-absorbed. "If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere," we sing; and "making it" is understood to require focus --focus largely on ourselves.

Thus, in our strivings and struggles, we can seem to be a people insensitive to the needs of others, a people who take little note of the weak, the frightened, and the hurting. And this is what many thought of us, until that dreadful morning when the terrorists came to do us harm.

Then we learned --perhaps even to our own surprise -- that within the hearts of the best of us there resides a goodness that is incredibly selfless. We learned that, when summoned by great events, we become in great numbers remarkably committed to the well-being of others, even total strangers. We become a strong people, a courageous people, a noble people -- a people for others.

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A young doctor stands in front of Saint Vincent's Hospital in scrubs. He has witnessed the slow and sickening collapse of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. His father works in an office on the 102nd floor. He is trembling but will not leave his post. He stands there surrounded by wheel-chairs and gurneys covered with glistening white sheets and ready to receive the injured. He is urged to go into the hospital, to sit down, to have a cup of coffee, and to grieve. "I am a doctor," he whispers. "The injured will be coming shortly. My place is here."

This is not a character out of fiction. This is not an imaginary hero. This is one of us, and I know. For I was standing at his side.

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On September 11th a police commander has inhaled the infected dust and soot that engulfed the area around the fallen Towers. He senses that his lungs are seriously damaged. On September 12th and several days thereafter, he leads his fellow police-officers through the horror that has come to be called "Ground Zero," careless of his own condition and all but offended by the suggestion that he go home for a rest and medical attention. "I am staying right here," he announces; and stay he does.

This is not a character out of fiction. This is not an imaginary hero. This is one of us, and I know. For I was one who urged him to take a break and see a doctor.

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A fire-fighter has made it to the 78th floor of the South Tower. Men and Women, half blinded and gripped with fear, follow his deep confident voice down narrow, slippery stairs. When all are able to fend for themselves, the fire-fighter turns and climbs back into the inferno above to shepherd others to safety. He is overcome by smoke. He falls lifeless on the stairs, while his helmet bounces with a thud to the landing below.

This is not a character out of fiction. This is not an imaginary hero. This is one of us.

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A team of emergency-workers digs into broken cement and pools of oily mud to pull half-dead bodies out from under piles of debris. They stop only to breathe a prayer for a victim being folded into a shiny, plastic body-bag, or to send up a shout of joy when a dust-covered form emerges as from out of a tomb and shows signs of life. They labor around the clock, day after day, asking nothing but to be allowed to continue. They are exhausted, and they know that at any moment their own lives might be snuffed out by a falling steel beam or a dislodged block of granite. Still, they work on – and on and on.

These are not characters out of fiction. These are not imaginary heroes. Each one is one of us.

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Some were privileged to be eye-witnesses to these magnificent demonstrations of courage and self-sacrifice. Others learned of them from newspaper accounts, radio reports, and images on the television screen. For several days, even weeks, following September 11th, 2001, it was as though our entire nation, were transported into a huge outdoor house of worship to be inspired by sermons delivered not in words but rather in deeds of incredible heroism and total selflessness.

In this venerable Church of Saint Peter's, for well over two centuries, the words of our Gospel this afternoon have been read and preached hundreds, no thousands, of times. The Lord commands us to love one another as He has loved us and adds that there is no greater love than this, that one lays down one's life for another. Preacher after preacher has repeated this message – a message of goodness, selflessness, and holiness at its zenith. But none have delivered it with the power with which it was delivered by the heroes of September 11th, 2001.

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The terrorists accomplished their heinous purpose. We cannot deny the immense and long-lasting harm they have done. Nonetheless, their evil begot a lesson in goodness that can never be repeated enough or meditated enough. Here in this City, when challenged by the most horrendous of events, men and women just like ourselves exhibited a love of neighbor beyond anything any of us might have expected. They proved how strong and noble we can be and gave us a measure against which to judge ourselves and our way of life throughout the years that lie ahead.

Nor were they alone in all of this. Immediately after the attack, individuals and teams of individuals from New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Washington, the South, the Midwest, the Far West, and even foreign lands came in great numbers to stand and struggle alongside our heroes, asking nothing but to be of help. We can never thank them enough. They too gifted us with a precious lesson in goodness.

Similarly, we can never sufficiently express our gratitude to the Governor who guided us, the Mayor who mightily led us, and the Commissioners of the Police Department, the Fire Department, and the Emergency Services who directed and inspired our heroes.

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Today we join in prayer for all of these and all of their counterparts in our nation's Capital and in Pennsylvania as well. Today too we lift our minds and hearts to our Heavenly Father on behalf of those who were lost in the terror of September 11th, the injured and all who suffered in our common tragedy. We listen to the beautiful words of the Hebrew Scriptures read to us a few moments ago. They tell us that uprightness

begets peace. If we are just, if we are compassionate, if we are willing to sacrifice ourselves for others, they proclaim, our God will love us, guide us, and grant us peace. The heroes of September 11th, 2001, have shown us the way. We embrace the lessons of goodness they have taught us; and we thank them from the depth of our souls, as we thank their families, their friends, and all those who loved and mourn them. Never will we forget them. Always will they have a privileged place in our prayers and in our hearts as well.