

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, J.C.D.
75th Anniversary of the Deaths of the “Four Chaplains”



Dear Sisters and Brothers,

It is a delight to return to St. Stephen's Parish to mark the 75th anniversary of an important moment in the history of the WW II, the charity of the four chaplains.

Later this same afternoon two teams will take the field to play in the super bowl. Think for just a minute about the funds involved in this enterprise. Everyone employed by the two teams has a salary, funds were exchanged for the use of the stadium, billions of dollars are involved in advertising, super bowl parties, parking, and so forth.

Certainly, players, coaches, and general managers are gifted. In contemporary society the relationship between gift and compensation is generally very clear. In today's Gospel passage there is a gift of healing from a fever, but the response is quite different. "Then the fever left her and she waited on them."

The Gospel links gift with service and teaches us about authentic charity. You and I know those truths and this afternoon we are reminded about our obligation to make the Gospel known. The effective poetry in bronze by Timothy Schmalz on these grounds call to mind all of those themes.

Peter's mother-in-law teaches us about the relationship between gift and service. She has been sick and then is cured by the action of the Lord Jesus. The passage tells us that the first result of her good health was to get up and wait on others.

The unmistakable challenge is to use our gifts constantly and consciously to build up the Body of Christ. The Latin American Bishops gathered at Aparecida in Brazil in 2008 reminded us that the greatest gift we have received is to know Christ and the greatest privilege is to make Him known to others. One clear way we do that is the use of our gifts to serve.

You can think of countless ways that this charitable service is carried out by Catholic Charities, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Red Cross, and so many other agencies.

There are also the many opportunities we are given every day to respond to a person in some kind of need. There is an unmistakable link between responsibility and service.

The four chaplains understood that relationship and gave of themselves. They were authentically men for others to the last ounce of their strength. You know they were volunteers for military service. Clergymen could not be drafted. George Fox, Clark Poling, Rabbi Alexander Goode, and Father John Washington were on the USS *Dorchester* because they volunteered to serve. I do not know, but I would imagine that many, if not most of the men who lived because of their sacrifice, had been drafted.

There is a clear notion here of self-giving, such as we see in the submission of the Lord Jesus to the Father's will so that we might have life in abundance. That giving of self in our very materialistic age must remain an important characteristic of our daily lives. We honor the four chaplains, not because we can do something for them beyond our prayers for their immortal souls, but so that we might learn to imitate their charity. We want to learn from them how to use our gifts and talents to serve others.

The Gospel tells us that Peter's mother-in-law was raised up – same verb for Resurrection of Jesus; already He shows the power of His victory. Same notion for those baptized to participate in the Resurrection. Pope Francis reminds us that "Being Church means being God's people, in accordance with the great plan of His fatherly love. This means that we are to be God's leaven in the midst of humanity. It means proclaiming and bringing God's salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope and strengthened on the way."¹

From the Lord we learn the meaning of authentic charity and from the chaplains we learn how to apply it to the situations and the moments of everyday living that are ours. Jesus contrasts the slavery of selfishness with the liberty of love and service. "He responds to the stricture of efficiency and the ironclad logic of production with the scandalous provocation of gratuity."² That is probably a lesson that we will not learn from the super bowl, but we will learn it from these four generous Army chaplains.

Jesus fuels His charity and apostolate with an intense dialogue with the Father. Despite the mission to save the world, before dawn, "He left and went off to a deserted place, where He prayed."³ In our busy lives we must embrace His example and make time for our earnest prayer.

We notice also that the Lord is not swayed by false enthusiasm or the cheers of the crowd. He does not wander aimlessly down the path lined with the cheers of success and constrained by the popularity experienced the day before. He will never change His message to satisfy the expectations of those who only want to hear affirmation. He will never waiver in the determination to proclaim the splendor of the truth.

¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 114.

² A. Pronzato, *Il Vangelo in Casa B*, p. 174.

³ Mk. 1:35.

Paul communicated well this tension in our vocation. The urgency to preach is a combination of charity and the free response of one called to the mission. However, there is also the element of necessity to respond to the divine call. After all, it is the Lord Himself who sends us forth.

The application of Christian liberty is the context for this beautiful passage from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. "I have become all things to all, to save at least some". Paul learned to become all things so as to preach Christ. His quest was to reach each person and so he set aside privileges, rank, and even adapted his way of speaking so that he could reach each person. For Jesus and those reborn in the waters of baptism, each human person is unique and merits love and special attention. There is no one who is not worth the trouble.

We might do well to remember the context in which Paul wrote. The specific problem was the buying and eating of meat offered to idols. It might seem to be a problem from another historical era, but the principle is essential in order to live and preach the Gospel. My exercise even of legitimate freedom can never be the cause of scandal for another. My love of Jesus Christ and my neighbor obliges me to consider the effect of my use of freedom in Christ. In other words, charity is the first rule. I must not only be good, but appear good, as well. In the Christian context, freedom is never from something, it is for something.

Paul would say that Peter's mother-in-law applies that principle by serving or preaching the example of charity by her service. Countless are our opportunities to announce the Gospel by effectively practicing our faith in everyday situations.

She teaches us that "a Christian is able to stand up only if he or she walks. Standing still, he loses his balance. However, the walking requires a hand!"⁴ The four chaplains teach us how to walk in the light of Christ and in the best traditions of fidelity to the prophetic spirit in the Law and the Prophets.

The three Christian chaplains would have been aware that Rabbi Goode no doubt found inspiration in the Book of Exodus, where the Chosen People were taught to practice charity to the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.

Watching the super bowl will be a source of enjoyment and we can appreciate the amply compensated gifts of ability and talent on the part of many. Not many are able to play football at that level. The lesson of the four chaplains, on the other hand, is the link between gracious gift and the ultimate sacrifice of service. Everyone here can imitate their example of selfless service and abundant love.

⁴ Pronzato, *op. cit.*, p. 178.