

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, J.C.D.
Memorial Mass for Father Capodanno
(3.IX.09)



My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The convergence of the memorial of St. Gregory the Great with this annual remembrance of the late Father Vincent Capodanno is a happy coincidence. Both lived in troubled times: the barbarian invasions and persecutions for the former and the era of Vietnam for the latter. Both served the Church by wearing a variety of hats: Before receiving the Papal Tiara, Gregory was a Prefect of Rome, a monk, and an early forerunner of those who represent the Holy Father. Vincent wore the biretta of a priest, toiled as a missionary in Taiwan, and died as a chaplain to the Marines.

Both knew how to put into practice the message that St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, because both had made a compelling decision to follow Jesus Christ and from that decision was born a host of others.

“Endure joyfully whatever may come, giving thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light.” St. Paul describes well what a person is able to do once he has discovered Christ and made Him the center of existence and the significant person behind every choice and every decision.

After his right hand was shattered in that fateful battle in Vietnam no one would have criticized Father Capodanno had he accepted medical evacuation. Certainly when he was wounded the second time and effectively lost his right arm, the expectation would have been that he be helped to the helicopter, but “he had work to do”. The third and final wound left no choice. He died completely at the service of his Marines. He died, because he recognized that a priest serves in persona Christi and no one else there could bring to the fallen what he offered, the sacraments of the Church. That was Father Capodanno’s version of *semper fidelis*!

That joyful endurance, which comes from the experience of a vocation in Jesus Christ, continues to be the experience of so many chaplains. They recognize the importance of a mission received from him, despite the endless bureaucracy, the full days of direct ministry, the challenges of the system, and the severe shortage of Catholic priests in all of the Armed Services. I greet the chaplains and retired chaplains here this evening and through them all of their brothers who continue to toil by their ministry to our men and women in uniform and their families.

Can we forget, then, in the context of this prayer for the priest Vincent Capodanno, the latest fatality in the chaplain corps, victim of the current tragic conflict in Iraq, Father Timothy Vakoc?

It all stems from a decision for Jesus Christ. That is what motivated the great Latin Doctor of the Church, Pope St. Gregory the Great, Father Capodanno, and everyone else who has learned to center his or her life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Could it be clearer than in the passage from St. Luke's Gospel which we have just heard? If Paul tells us about bearing good fruit and challenges us to take advantage of the power of God, to be strong and patient in all things, what do the Apostles have to say?

Peter and the others are expert fishermen. They have been actively engaged in catching fish since they could walk. Had they allowed their skepticism at the Lord's command to try again take hold of them, everyone would have understood. Experience is always the safe spot for our decisions. We are comfortable with what we know. Peter, however, welcomes the word of the Lord and believes in its efficacy. Jesus says *duc in altum* and Peter obeys. He knows better than this carpenter's son, but he obeys.

What happens? There is a miraculous catch of fish, so great that the boat is in danger of sinking. The greater miracle, however, is one that all of us have experienced. We meet Christ and our conscience is opened. Peter sees himself and recognizes that he is a sinner. He confesses his condition and fears that it is too dark for him to remain with the Lord. "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." Who, after all, except the Blessed Virgin Mary to whom this magnificent basilica is dedicated, can stand blameless in the presence of the Lord?

Ah, but it cannot end there. There is a mission. Meeting the Lord Jesus and recognizing the poverty of our condition have an immediate social dimension. Peter must reach out to others and bring them to the same experience. Gregory understood that; Vincent Capodanno died, because he believed that. You and I, dear brothers and sisters, also know that our baptism and especially the grace of our confirmation urge us to go forth and introduce Jesus Christ to every other human person.

This new encounter with the Lord and Savior of humanity represented a new beginning for Peter. He saw himself and appreciated Christ. Each new day is a new beginning for a Catholic. It is an invitation to live at the Lord's service as we begin each day with His word. Does our daily existence seem routine, humdrum? Do we tire of what seems to be the same?

Yet, having met Christ, we can always discover something new: the word of God, a spark, a new vision, another sign of God's care. That is what motivated Father Capodanno, Gregory, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. That can also be our gift to others, just as we see what happens when the Apostles act on the Lord's word. Obviously, however, we have to perceive the importance of the power and authority of that word.

Finally the Gospel tells us that they left all and followed Him. That is a radical response on a personal level, but also in the decision to distance oneself from everything, which in one way or another could diminish the power of my decision to adhere to Jesus.

More important than leaving everything—radical and provocative as it sounds— is finding the ultimate and definitive center of my life, which is Jesus Christ. As Victor Frankl wrote, when you have a determining goal in life any how can be resolved. Or in other words and at the risk of repeating myself, when you decide in favor of Jesus Christ, every other decision flows from that first one.

To quote another spiritual writer on St. Francis: “We always try to add a few inches to our height. ...Even when we labor for the Kingdom of God, we do not look for anything other than to make ourselves greater, until the day when crushed, nothing remains but the single immeasurable reality: God exists. Then we discover that only He is omnipotent, only He is holy, only He is good.

“The one who accepts that truth and is pleased with it, finds serenity in his heart. God exists and is everything. Whatever happens, God exists and His light exists. It is enough that God is God.”¹ Father Capodanno had arrived at that conclusion and he took care of those entrusted to his pastoral care so that they, too, might experience the presence and the touch of Jesus Christ.

Had he not died on that battlefield he would have been eighty years old this year. Tragically, men and women still die on battlefields. We never seem to get any wiser. Speaking yesterday about the anniversary of the beginning of World War II, Pope Benedict suggested prayer: "Let us ask God that the spirit of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation may pervade the hearts of humankind. Europe and the world today need a spirit of communion. Let us build it upon Christ and His Gospel, upon the foundation of charity and truth."²

Today as we remember the immense contribution of Pope St. Gregory the Great to the one Church and as we honor the memory of Father Capodanno and pray for him, we recognize what is ultimately important. When we stand before the Throne of Grace, the Lord Jesus will not ask us how much money we earned, how many stars or stripes were on our uniform, how much purple or red on our cassocks, or how good we looked. He will only evaluate if we put out into the deep at His word, if we did our work. This evening we beg that our praise of these figures take the highest form: imitation!

¹ E. Leclercq, *Sapienza di un povero*, p. 145.

² Benedict XVI, 2.IX.09.