

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, J.C.D.
Memorial Mass for Father Vincent Capodanno
7 September 2021



A week ago Sunday dear friends presented their first-born son for the waters of baptism. It was the occasion for the baby's rebirth into eternal life and initiation into a community of faith, the communion of saints. When we, the baptized, enter into the celebration of the Eucharist we are united with all the members of that communion: those on earth, those journeying to the fullness of eternal life, and those who already enjoy the experience of being eternally in the presence of the living God.

This Sacrifice of the Mass allows us to be present on Calvary in that saving moment of the gift of Jesus Christ offered to all of us, the ultimate accompaniment. Father Vincent Capodanno, for whom we pray and whose memory we honor, understood the uniqueness of that gift. He brought that life-saving gift to his Marines in battle and elsewhere. In that role he could not be replaced by anyone but a priest and so it is fitting that we gather in his memory around the altar of God.

St. Paul reflects for us tonight on the effects of baptism and its meaning for daily life. The Gospel instructs us on prayer, mission, and the healing that we seek after so many months of suffering from the effects of the pandemic. We recognize our need for communion.

"Walk in Christ is the core of Paul's imperative."¹ While we know that Marines and soldiers spend a good deal of time marching, Paul's perspective is wider. It is an image of life. We use the notion of pilgrimage as a descriptive image for our journey of life and we are here because we have been impressed by how Vincent Capodanno "walked" his life. His openness to the urgings of the Holy Spirit led him to Maryknoll and then to the Navy

¹ Dennis Hamm, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, p. 195.

Chaplaincy at a time when that ministry was not so popular. He made his way to the battlefield also under the urgings of the Holy Spirit.

In our life with Christ, if you are not walking forward you are moving backward, because even staying in the same place is a failure to advance in Christ. Sense of walking is acting, behaving, living. What draws us forward to Christ?

We might find the images confusing in this passage from the Letter to the Colossians, because, while talking about walking, Paul mentions that we are rooted in Christ. Is the notion of walking and being rooted a contradiction? Can you be rooted and walk at the same time? Baptism is a rebirth, like a plant nurtured in rich soil—think about the newborn who leaves the womb (where he or she was protected and shielded), but ideally is received by a loving family where he or she grows—rooted and living forward. The child is introduced into a community and accompanied.

So also for us. We try to make certain that we are firmly fixed to Jesus Christ and then we can progress forward on the path traced by the Lord for each one of us. Everyone has a vocation—that call to follow Christ in a specific way and each one of us is gifted to respond adequately to what is asked of us.

It is not always a linear progression. There is a warning about a threat to this walking in the faith: another way of thinking and behaving; those in the neighborhood who would tear Christians away from their rootedness in the Messiah; an empty seductive way of life—ideology and certain practices; rooted in human tradition. That is an ever-present danger. What Jesus said in His farewell discourse (Jn. 17:14-5) about being in the world, but not of the world is still true. It is perhaps even more pressing, because for a few generations Catholics have been “accepted” into US society and we are tempted to acquiesce rather than insist on what we believe.

The imagery that Paul uses to compare circumcision to baptism is powerful and also useful in this context. The language of stripping off and putting on alludes to the explanatory rites where the newly baptized puts on a white garment to signify the new dignity acquired and is invited to bring it unstained into the Kingdom of heaven. “While that symbolism pertains to the dignity and fresh innocence of the individual and the person’s intimate relationship to Christ, it also signifies putting off the old life and taking on a whole new way of life shared with all the baptized.”²

We need others to help us walk forward with the garment unsullied by sin. We look to the saints to show us that it is possible. We come to our Mother’s arms in this magnificent crypt to be reassured in our commitment to her Son and to walk forward as a missionary disciple.

There is no question that Vincent Capodanno was at the front during Operation Swift, because his faith and love impelled him to be there. His love and service were not generic, but specifically the ability to see Christ in the one who needs me. He knew his

² Ibid, pp. 202-3.

vocation and responded concretely to minister to his Marines in harm's way. He follows in the footsteps of ten of those Apostles listed in today's Gospel who died for the faith.

The Lord Jesus spent the night in prayer, in deep conversation with the Father, and then He choose the twelve, the band of those who would be closest to Him, and would bring the message of salvation to the ends of the earth. They are separated from others to bring the message to the multitude. They are empowered for a mission. There was no consultation with HR, no physical or psychological examination, no testing for eloquence or literary skills, or anything else. They were not the best and the brightest, but they accomplished the mission and we are here today, because eleven of them were faithful, moved by the Spirit, and zealous for the Kingdom of God. Please pray that the three of us here, among their successors and despite our shortcomings, might accomplish our mission, as well.

Pray also for the chaplains here and the co-sponsored deacons and seminarians. They continue to respond to the missionary call and follow in the footsteps of Vincent Capodanno, Emil Kapaun, Verbis Lafleur (who anniversary is today), and a host of others.

However, the passage does not end with the selection of the Apostles, because the Lord continues to assure healing of body and spirit. He received those who came or were brought to Him and offers them instruction and healing. His being present for others was the lesson that Father Capodanno took to heart.

That is also what the Servant of God was doing in his ministry, first as a missionary and, then, as a chaplain. He offered hope, encouragement, and the gift of his presence to those who were entrusted to him. My brothers in the priesthood and preparing for it, do not forget this example of service—especially when it is challenging to respond.

If you reread the citation granting Father Capodanno the Medal of Honor, it mentions his administration of the last rites to the dying, giving medical aid to the wounded, while being wounded himself. He died rushing to the aid of a wounded corpsman. He ignored self in order to serve others. If each one of us took that lesson home this evening and put it into practice, we could renew our families and communities. Spreading the message of Father Capodanno begins with dethroning king me and seeing Christ in my neighbor.

What began in the waters of baptism ten days ago for an infant or several more years ago for you and me is brought to fulfillment when we walk in the footsteps of those whose lives teach us. We can do nothing for Father Capodanno, but we can learn from his example and teach others to do likewise. If we cooperate with divine grace, the Holy Spirit will renew the face of the earth.