

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, J.C.D.
Veterans Day Mass Commemorating the WWI Armistice Centennial
Sunday XXXII of year "B"



In high school, our freshman history teacher had us study the situation which led up to the First World War. We read about the Foreign Ministers in Germany, Austria, France, Russia, and Great Britain. We studied the positions of the crowned heads, the President of France, Prime Ministers and so forth.

Several weeks went into the study of the causes of what Benedict XV called the *inutile strage*, the useless slaughter. At the end we were supposed to determine which Country was at fault. I do not remember my conclusion, except that it was not what the good teacher thought. This morning, however, we have not gathered to assign blame, look at causes, or even rejoice at the victory which resulted from the US entrance into the Great War.

We gather on what would be the liturgical memorial of a soldier, St. Martin of Tours, rather to give thanks and to recognize those who sacrificed themselves in a new kind of conflict. As brothers and sisters of the Prince of Peace, we also assemble to beg for a lasting peace.

The Word of God this morning lends itself well to the anniversary we celebrate. The two women cited in the readings teach us about that giving and, more importantly, about ordering our lives. They offer a lived example of the First Commandment. God, the Lord of my life is first. The false gods who claim so much attention in our materialistic and hedonistic world do not hold sway with these women. The contrast with the rich young man of a few weeks ago is noticeable. He is too attached to his securities just as the scribes are greedy and vain.

Both women show us what is the correct attitude for worship and in any relationship with God. In the Kingdom of God, the only logic is that of complete gift. The only one who possesses God is the one who gives all, the one who gives all because God does not

entrust Himself to the one who holds back. The one not disposed to give Him all, has yet to take the first step in the Christian life. "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for My sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it." (Mk 8:35) St. Paul says: "What do you own that was not given to you?" (1 Cor. 4:7b).

Both widows teach us not to fear offering to God all we have and are. They invite us to consecrate our lives to Him. If we arrive at the point where His is what is ours, His task will be the care of us. No doubt you have all heard the story of the young pediatrician, St. Gianna Beretta Molla, who would not follow the advice of her doctors to treat the cancer that threatened her life. Rather she waited for her daughter to be born and then it was too late. She sacrificed so as to give life. The soldiers we honor today risked their lives for a greater value, to end a senseless war.

The Knights of Columbus who maintain this shrine and convoke us this morning constantly stress virtue and authentic values. Among those is patriotism, that healthy love of one's Nation. That authentic patriotic love of our Country must never blind us to the needs of those beyond our borders.

We never forget that the US achieved independence because France, Poland, and some German princedoms were willing to lend troops, expertise, and support. So also have we, as a Nation, responded to the aggression of others so as to defend the weak, support our allies, and favor the freedoms in which we believe.

The collaboration among Nations to fight a war, however, means that dialogue failed. Disagreement, aggression, persecution, or some other authentic cause pushed good people to wage war. One thing that I have learned in the last ten years is that those who defend us are not eager to see war. They know first-hand the cost. Their families help them pay the price and for decades they run the risk of bearing in their bodies and minds the wages of war. To quote brother Knight Joyce Kilmer: "The brave soldier...is not an automaton, but a man sufficiently enlightened, sufficiently educated, to have achieved self-mastery."¹

We pray for them this morning as we also beg for those who successfully defended world freedom one hundred years ago. Men from this Country were recruited and served to fight far away. The US was ill-equipped to fight a long-distance war. The standing Army had only 127,000 troops. Many had never been away from home before. Many still had vivid ties to the lands in which they fought. My father's parents were not yet U.S. citizens and he, a boy of 11 at the start of the war, was too young to enlist.

In the end 4 million soldiers and 800,000 from the Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard would participate in the US war effort. The response was unprecedented and the mobilization complete.

Consider that as the author of Hebrews speaks to us about the generosity of Christ's unique gift at which we are present now and every time we gather for the

¹ Joyce Kilmer in a speech at Campion College, published in *The Columbiad*, August, 1917.

Eucharist. His role as an intercessor is highlighted in the passage. An intercessor is one who goes in our place and makes a request for us or, as one author put it, someone not afraid to get embroiled in the middle of things for our sakes.

In a very real way, the men and women of the Armed Forces fulfill a similar role. They defend us by getting in the midst of a conflict in our place or by assuring the powerful message that might deter adversaries from threatening us. It is good for us to remember that sacrificial willingness to serve a higher good. It is essential that we give thanks.

We also thank the Knights of Columbus who supported the war effort both by encouraging dampened spirits: “everybody welcome. Everything free”; and by caring for spiritual needs with the support of auxiliary Catholic chaplains. That support continues today in so many different ways.

Last year Boston College invited me to speak at their Veterans’ Day commemoration. When I was a student there an event of that nature with student participation would have been unthinkable. The most poignant moment was the reading of the names of the alumni killed in the various conflicts since the university’s establishment in 1863 by a former chaplain, Father John McElroy, S.J. Those names represented only a fraction of the tremendous sacrifice of human potential when men fail to solve differences by other means.

Today we commemorate the end of a war that claimed more than 20 million lives. Truly, a useless massacre in the words of Pope Benedict XV. We are grateful for that uneasy peace that began at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918, but an anniversary never serves only to look back in gratitude. We cannot restore those lives or fill the gaps that were created in families.

Rather an anniversary obliges us to look forward, to profit from what we celebrate, to determine what led to that inability to dialogue so as to foster lasting peace. More than anyone else we pray with the prophet Isaiah and with the Pope Benedict XVI several years ago: “Lord, make your promise come fully true...Burn the tramping boots. Let the time of the garments rolled in blood come to an end. Fulfill the prophecy that ‘of peace there will be no end’...Establish the dominion of your truth and your love in the world.”²

War is the failure of statesmen, but the weight is borne by the members of the Armed Forces. As followers of the Prince of Peace, you and I must strive to foster lasting peace. We begin with ourselves and a renewed attempt to promote civility in the discourse of our land. We constructively promote understanding among peoples by seeking an end or at least a reduction in racism, xenophobia, and poverty. We never forget that the person before us is, first of all, created in the image and likeness of God. He or she may not share our views, but always possesses an innate dignity. Ours may be the widow’s mite or the meager measures of flour and oil of the destitute mother of Zarephath, but like them we will offer it for the promotion of understanding and world peace. So that, when

² Benedict XVI, homily at Midnight Mass, 24.XII.2010.

the just Judge returns, He will offer “salvation to those who eagerly await him.” (Heb. 9:28b).

Somewhere I probably have that freshman history notebook and reams of mimeographed dispatches from diplomats and world powers. It made for a fascinating study, but you and I are missionary disciples sent forward and not backwards. With Pope Benedict XV we can also “never cease from reechoing in the ears of men and setting forth in our acts, that saying of St. John (1Jn.3:23): ‘Let us love one another’.” All other efforts are in vain because “he that loves not, abides in death.” (1Jn. 3:14).³

³ Benedict XV, Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum, 1.XI.1914)