

## HOMILY

### *Memorial Day*

*May 28, 2007*

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The late Prime Minister of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, once noted that there are two experiences in life that were so traumatic, so far reaching in their scope, that having experienced them, one's life could never be quite the same. One was prison; the other was war. As we gather here this morning on the very day our country commemorates Memorial Day, I suggest we address ourselves to the latter.

While there are many wars that will be remembered today, I suggest we take a look at the Civil War. The Civil War is the appropriate place to begin a memorial because it is in the Civil War that Memorial Day has its roots. It was John Logan, a former Federal general, who called for the first formal day of remembrance on May 30, 1868, three years before our parish was founded on this very site. School children were asked to spread flower petals upon the graves of the war dead. Since that time, the day has been changed to the last Monday in May and the concept has been expanded to include a remembrance of America's war dead sustained in all her conflicts.

First we come to reflect. We reflect upon the awful cost of war and that freedom is costly. Consider some footnotes of history concerning the battle at Shiloh:

If Lew Wallace, who fought on the Shiloh battlefield, had been killed, we would never have known of the great literary work Ben Hur.

If Ulysses S. Grant had been slain at Shiloh, we would have lost a President of the United States.

If Francis Shoup had fallen while leading his Confederate battalions, we would have lost a university president.

What of those who did not make it through? We must lament this day on how many potential doctors, authors, researchers, leaders, clergy, and heads of families had their careers cut short during the horrible two days of Shiloh. Then multiply that by all the battles and all the wars in America's history and we begin to realize the staggering toll—all in all, one million deaths. Thus, it is right as we gather this morning that we remember, lest we forget, that war robs us of the flower of our nation.

We gather this day not only to remember but also to recommit. If we walk away this morning and let our national holiday pass us by tomorrow, with no stronger resolve to end wars, then we have celebrated Memorial Day in vain as just another day to get some planting or shopping done. Likewise, we in no way do our deceased comrades a disservice by wrestling with the painful question: *Were all these deaths necessary?* We must somehow come to the understanding that the seed of most wars is to be found in economics. There was an expression in the Confederate Army: "Rich man's war, poor man's fight." How tragic that the same can be echoed about most wars.

But military strength is not to be despised when there are international gangsters on the prowl. At the same time, war can hardly be an answer to the world's plight. And, in the end, it might well be our undoing. General Douglas MacArthur stood on the deck of the battleship U.S.S. Missouri in Tokyo Bay in 1945 to receive the formal surrender of the Japanese Government. At that time he made a penetrating observation. He said, "The problem is basically theological in nature. It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh." That's from a professional soldier.

Just outside of the city of Atlanta, Georgia, there is a monument called Stone Mountain. It took two generations to create that enormous carving on the side of a mountain that depicts three heroes of the Confederacy: Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis. Although it is a fascinating memorial, the logistics that were required in creating such a work of art is mind-boggling, but the message is somewhat disturbing. All three men are clothed in battle uniforms and sitting atop white chargers. The message rings out loud and clear—war is glorious. Despite any positive personal qualities that these men may have exhibited in their own lives, I would suggest to you that in that chiseled artwork we have missed the message of war. Someday, I would like to discover a mountain with the faces of, say, Abraham Lincoln, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

So we gather this day, both to remember and to recommit. We remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their nation. Some were instilled with a sense of patriotism and duty; others may not have had such high ideals. They were in far away places where they did not wish to be, fighting a war that they did not completely understand. At this point, it makes no difference whether they did understand. Those whom we this day honor have paid the supreme price. In death they are equal. In death, they are all noble. It is now remaining to us, the living, to purify our nation that their deaths may not have been in vain.