

[Readings: Acts 6:1-7; Psalm 33; 1 Peter 2:4-9; John 14:1-12]

Growing up in the Zukowski family, there were two sources of wisdom and knowledge: Dad and Mom. As the years go on, the memory dims, but it seems that whenever we asked Mom a question about faith or life, she always had an answer for us. Maybe not the most theological, but always the most practical. Whenever we asked Dad a question, sometimes, once in a while HIS response was: “Go ask your mother!”

We all want answers, and it would be great if things were spelled out for us. But that isn't very often how it goes.

Today's Readings provide us with initial answers to some of these questions.

In our First Reading, we see that in the first decades of the Early Church, as the early Christian community grew, various needs and even conflicts sometimes called for a redefinition and restructuring of ministries. This is how we received the ministry of Deacons in the Church because of this adaptation to cultural needs, “The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly;” I chuckle every time I read the next line, “Even a large number of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” Isn't it great to have priests who are obedient to the faith?!”

The Good News is that the possibility is there for us to become “living stones,” as St. Peter says in today's Second Reading. “Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Here is a remarkable invitation to come to Jesus as “a living stone.”

Nothing is less animate than a rock. But think like Michelangelo and realize that a stone contains a world of possibilities. The stone carver has a bag full of tools to chisel this rock to fit precisely into the space in a wall where it can be most useful. Each stone builds on the integrity of the whole until a building arises in which it plays a crucial supportive part. The humble stone is a single note in a Bach concerto. It is an incidental character in a Broadway cast. It is one sentence in *David Copperfield*. But put all the notes together, all the actors, all the sentences, and you have a masterpiece. This is the organic and vital house that faith built, and we don't have the Body of Christ without it.

However healthy or dysfunctional life has been or is, whatever blessings or mistakes have happened, they become the brick and mortar that form the foundation of our lives and become part of the living Kingdom of God already here on earth.

We are chosen, royal, priestly, and holy. These are the attributes of the stones that comprise the Church. We aren't part of this story by accident. Each one of us in this assembly has been chosen to be here, invited to the house of faith in some way. Many of us were invited first by our parents, who saw to our Baptism and religious education. Later, other mentors in the faith arose who shepherded us to the point of religious understanding and the moral formation we now enjoy. Perhaps now we ourselves are issuing the invitation to family, friends, and community by our own example of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Our Gospel shows us the process of finding answers to our questions about life and about faith. We are presented with some of the most moving, inspiring words of John's Gospel. I have turned to these words in some of the darker days and moments of my own life.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God, have faith also in me.” “I am going to prepare a place for you.”

Have you heard this story before? Some folks think that the more good they do on earth, the bigger their mansion will be in Heaven. A wealthy man dies and stands at the Pearly Gates in Heaven. St. Peter lets him in and together, they stroll through the golden paved streets of Heaven. Accustomed to the more fashionable neighborhoods while on earth, he is surprised that they go from the mansions, to the mid-sized homes, to the modest homes and eventually to simple wooden shacks. St. Peter points to one of the shacks and says, “Here is your eternal home.” The rich man asks, “Why is my home so small?” St. Peter answers, “Because your eternal home is built only of the good deeds you did on earth that are sent up here to Heaven.”

I like a better interpretation of our eternal home. While we are still on earth, we are challenged to become perfected in the love of God. If we get to Heaven, the perfecting love we shared on earth becomes the perfected love of eternal life with God in Heaven. So everyone’s mansion is of equal size! That makes more sense to me!

The answers to our questions while we are still on earth are revealed when Jesus Christ tells us in today’ Gospel that this life isn’t all that there is. That our priorities point to Heaven and to eternity, and not simply to human existence on earth.

Both Thomas and Philip need more information to process this. Their questions are not those of doubt and uncertainty. They are pleas for a deeper understanding that will lead to a deeper faith. Jesus Christ IS “the way, and the truth and the life.” Jesus and His Father ARE one, along with that sometimes elusive Holy Spirit. The answer to all of our deepest

questions are answered in faith and in works. In words and in actions. So ask yourself these questions and reflect on them this week:

- What questions about our faith, and the way things are, trouble you the most?
- What definition of who Jesus is makes the most sense to you?
- Do you feel chosen and precious in the sight of God, as Saint Paul describes?
- In what ways do we do the works that Jesus did? What more can/should we do?

Now, go, and ask your mother – your Holy Mother, the Church!
ALLELUIA and AMEN!

[Readings: Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; Psalm 66; 1 Peter 3:15-18; John 14:15-21]

You and I are now at the same place where Jesus and His Apostles are in today's Gospel. Between Jesus' departure from this earth and His return in glory at the Second Coming. Jesus chooses His words and advice carefully. What's the first thing He says in today's excerpt from His farewell speech? "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."

Some people use those words to manipulate us. "If you really loved me, you would buy this very expensive item that I don't need." "If you loved me, you would let me go out with my friends and do something bad that I shouldn't be doing." "If you loved me, you would be able to read my mind and know what I am thinking."

Some of us think that Commandments, rules or regulations stifle, restrict and confine us. In fact, they help us to learn the truth, to be set free, and to grow in our faith formation.

What were HIS commandments? Love God. Love others. Love yourself. So simple to say. Love Language is so difficult to live out. I recently read what Love Language really means. And on this Mother's Day, we thank those women who have shown us Love Language. There are five qualities of Love Language.

Quality Time: As worn out as these words have become, spending time with each other is one of the most precious gifts we can give each other.

Words of Affirmation: For every complaint we give each other, we need to give a compliment. This helps build self-esteem in spouses and in children.

Acts of Service: We live outside our personal, self-centered needs by tending to the needs of others. We learn to become members of the world-wide human family.

Physical Touch: An unexpected hand on the shoulder, a loving nudge, even a glance of affection go a long way. Hugs, too, when they are appropriate.

Gift Giving: We cultivate an "attitude of gratitude" by sharing what we have.

Jesus showed these five qualities while He was on earth. Three years of quality time spent with His Apostles. Affirming them in their spiritual progress and correcting them when they didn't. Coming to serve and not to be served. Giving His healing touch to those who in need. Giving the gift of the Holy Spirit after He left His earthly life.

Jesus calls them His “friends.” True friendship satisfies our human heart. True friends help us to make the right choices. True friends help us get through life’s difficulties. We give the best of what we have to each other, and on those bad days, we give the worst. We learn to say, ‘I’m sorry,’ and ‘I forgive you.’” The Church is the same way. Why aren’t we getting it?

We lament about how so many people are choosing the Culture of Death over the Culture of Life. They are abandoning their faith and leaving the Church. They still don’t get the message that Jesus preached and gave us to share with the world.

You and I are not selling the product convincingly enough to attract people to the Gospel, to the Church, to St. Martin’s. Why is this? Do we believe what we profess? And do we put it into action so powerfully that others see our faith and want to imitate it?

I have found over the years that the Number One Reason why people join any parish is simple. They say, “I want what you have.” They have seen our relationship with Jesus Christ, our Catholic faith in action, and they want to share in that themselves.

Do we need a helper, an advocate, like those Apostles upon whom the Holy Spirit has not yet descended? Alisa Hope Wagner once said, “The Holy Spirit is like the wind. It can be gentle enough to stroke a leaf but hard enough to bend a tree.”

How is the Holy Spirit working in your lives right now? Is it a gentle breeze or a powerful force? Is it both? The Apostles and the disciples are fruitful in their ministry because they have someone alongside of them, in addition to the Holy Spirit. They have each other. We have each other here at St. Martin de Porres Parish.

As your pastor I can tell you that although our number of active parishioners has suffered since the COVID-19 Pandemic, I have seen great spiritual progress in so many of you. We are becoming that “leaner, meaner church” that Pope Benedict XVI once spoke about. “Leaner” meaning fewer in numbers. “Meaner” not in the sense of being mean, but “meaner” in the sense of becoming spiritually stronger, more fit. We are called to focus on quality, not quantity!

Now we need to figure out how to become an evangelical Church, as Pope Francis is challenging us to be.

How to be Intentional, Joyful, Missionary Disciples. You haven’t heard THAT in my homily for a long time! But that’s our job title and our mission, given by Jesus

Himself: you and I are called to be Intentional – we freely choose to do it and want to do it; Joyful – we have the enduring Joy of the Lord in our hearts; Missionary – we are called to get out of bed, get off the couch, get off the pews and work; we are called to be Disciples – students, learners, realizing that we still have so much to learn and to do. This is because of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete.

At the time of Jesus, a “paraclete” was a legal assistant, a courtroom advocate. Jesus is telling us that the Holy Spirit is OUR legal assistant Who speaks up for us when we are falsely accused, judged or wrongly condemned.

Jesus calls that Spirit, the Paraclete, the “Spirit of Truth.” God always knows the truth about us, despite what people think of us and the wrong things people say about us. Jesus promises to be with us. He says, “I will not abandon you. I will not leave you orphaned. I am with you.” We have that “Advocate,” that “Paraclete,” that legal assistant Whom we can call to be alongside us. I think of my dear Mom, God rest her soul, and the many ways she was an advocate for us four kids over the years.

St. Peter gives us a word of encouragement in today's Second Reading: “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.” Be ready and be prepared to defend your Catholic faith. I think that's what makes us different from this world. We have Light and Truth and Hope. The world has only darkness and lies and despair.

The choice seems so easy, doesn't it? But the Evil One makes sin so beautiful, so attractive, so seductive. He makes the darkness appear as light. He makes his lies appear to be the truth. He takes away our hope and leaves us in despair. He has been busy more and more with each generation.

When we debate with those who challenge our beliefs, St. Peter says to “do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear.” We don't resort to personal attacks. We don't shout or call names or use labels. We debate the issue objectively. We discuss the issue with charity.

Don't ever be ashamed of defending the truth.

The Letter of Peter says, "It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil." Where in your life have you had to change your behavior,

make a difficult choice, or renounce something you desired because of your faith in God? To what good did these sacrifices lead?

The world may have some pretty convincing attorneys and legal advocates on its side. But we have God on our side. We are baptized and most of us are confirmed and strengthened by the Eucharist. We don't have to wait any longer nor do we need to be afraid. Case closed. Court dismissed. AMEN! ALLELUIA!

[Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Eph 1:17-23; Matt 28: 6-20]

The older we get, the more we lose the familiar, the safe. The old neighborhood, in which we lived and grew, especially if we lived in Detroit, is gone or unrecognizable. How many jobs have we had in our lifetime? Who among our loved ones have been taken from us by death? How do we survive after the breakup of a relationship? It's all a matter of time. It's about time.

How do we know what time it is? The clock on the wall gives us one answer. Then the moment passes, and we're obliged to look again for a new answer shortly. The deeper understanding of what time it is comes from *context* -- which is hardly written on the wall.

Context tells us whether it's the beginning, middle, or end of a relationship, for example. It tells us whether it's time to stay or to go, to listen or to speak, to agree or to object, to reap or to sow. This deeper sense of time requires our full attention, some experience, and a lot of wisdom.

There was never a one-size-fits-all approach to delivering the Gospel. Sometimes it was important to follow every letter of the law. Later that same day, an opportunity might arise where the law was an obstacle to an even greater fidelity.

Jesus realizes that now was the time to return to the Father. When the disciples asked Jesus, "Is this the right time to restore the Kingdom to Israel?" After three years with Jesus, the Apostles still thought that Jesus came to establish a political, military kingdom to topple the Romans and restore the Jewish nation. Jesus must have thought, "Father, if I don't leave now, I'm gonna KILL these people!" And listen to how Matthew accurately, painfully and yet briefly, summarizes the Ascension experience in today's Gospel: "The eleven disciples saw Jesus. They worshiped, but they doubted."

Note that this is the very last time they are going to see Jesus Christ in the flesh, and they couldn't even give Him the benefit of their total understanding and support. But are you and I any different? We come here to worship every Sunday, but do we not also come with our own doubts?

We are never truly alone. As people of faith, surely this is something that we have been taught somewhere along the line. There are times when we may feel alone, we may feel as if our family, our friends, or even our Church has abandoned us.

We might even feel like Jesus has deserted us when our prayers aren't answered in the ways we want them to be answered. The fact remains, though, that we

are never truly alone. Right before the Ascension, Jesus promises the disciples, "I will be with you always." That same promise holds firm for us today. Just as a parent would never leave a child behind, Jesus never abandons us. The following story illustrates that point.

One evening, a father who lived in a suburb of New York, said to his 10-year-old son, 'I want you to join me at my office next week. We'll take the subway and you can spend some time seeing how I spend my day. Then you'll come home by yourself so you can get acquainted with traveling by subway.' The boy was a bit apprehensive about the prospect of coming home alone but his father assured him he would be fine. What parent lets their 10-year-old kid ride alone in a New York City subway? A kid who is left "Home Alone?" AAARRRGGGHHH!!!

On the morning they left, his father explained all the details of the trip to New York and gave him a written, detailed set of instructions for returning. After boarding the train, his father showed him the maps posted in the cars which identified all the stops. He explained that when they changed trains, the next train would be waiting for their arrival. Everything went smoothly and they arrived in New York as planned. However, the young boy was still nervous and scared.

Everything went smoothly and they arrived in New York as planned. However, the young boy was still apprehensive as his father took him back to the station for the return trip home.

He had the instructions, he had his father's assurance he would do fine but he still worried. As he waved goodbye to his father and boarded the train, he immediately went to the section where the maps were located. Sure enough, all the stops were outlined. He got off at the correct station and, just as his father said, the other train was waiting on the next ramp.

He boarded it and as he again studied the map, he was relieved to see that his 'home' station was just six stops away. Now, he felt more confident.

When the train approached his station, he got up, stood in front of the exit door and when it opened he breathed a sigh of relief... he had made it. His mother was there to meet him.

He walked her, turned to look behind him, and suddenly, he saw his father leaving the train car right behind his. **His father had been with him all the time.** There had never been any need to worry. His father took his arm and said, "Son, you know I

will always be with you when you need me.” As he locked arms with his parents, a very confident, happy – and relieved! -- boy knew he was surrounded by those who love him.

Just like the dad in this story gave his son instructions to follow, and the assurance that he would be fine, so Jesus does the same for us. Our instructions from Jesus are contained in the Gospels; we need only to take the time to read them. Our assurance from Jesus comes in the words, “I will be with you always.” Do you believe? How strong is your faith?

In the meantime, the disciples – and we – are commissioned, missioned, sent to “go and make disciples.” That is the call to evangelization. We are to make disciples, to baptize and to teach, savoring and cherishing His final words to us: “Know that I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

Today is World Communications Day. This year, Our Holy Father, Pope Francis has called each one of us “communicators,” and asks “communicators” to deliver a message of hope and trust in a season of fear, anxiety and uncertainty.

This is the true answer to the question: What time is it? Now is the hour that God comes to save us. And God calls us to communicate that message to others. The departure of Christ has led to a new age, to the apostolic era in which Christ speaks now through the Church. He is still present, at every Mass. His voice resounds through His holy Word in the Bible. I heard it said that if you want to know what God’s plan is for us, read the Bible. If you want to know what God’s specific plans are for you and me, read the Bible out loud! Likewise, the departure of Christ is not permanent. Christ will come again. But today it is not only the Apostles, but also all of us disciples, who proclaim Him now. AMEN! ALLELUIA!

[Readings: Acts 2:1-11; Ps. 104; 1 Cor. 12:3b-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23]

When I first arrived as pastor here almost nine years ago, I established the practice of giving a “State of the Parish” address on Pentecost Sunday weekend. The COVID-19 pandemic put a temporary halt on that, so I have chosen to revisit that tradition. So, here we go! *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!

After traveling the United States for 10 months during 1831-32, the French diplomat and political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville declared in his classic work “Democracy in America” that “there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over people’s souls than in America.”

Fast forward almost 200 years later. A new report from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) titled “Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval” casts a shadow of doubt on the religious fervor of Americans, only 16% of whom stated that religion is the most important thing in their lives. Those with no religious affiliation represented 27% of the population. Likewise a majority of Americans either seldom (28%) or never (29%) attend religious services; and more than one-third (37%) of those who exited a religion identified themselves as “former” Catholics.

Father Thomas Gaunt, the coordinator of the study, noted a distinction between institutional membership and belief. “These are people who believe in God,” he said. “They just don’t necessarily believe in institutional churches.”

“When you’re in the Northeast and Midwest and you’re looking at an empty church, that’s us -- that’s just kind of hard to comprehend. But in the South, Fr. Gaunt says, “the Archdiocese of Atlanta, Georgia added a million Catholics to its membership rolls over the last 30 years”.

Sunday Mass attendance has almost returned to pre-COVID levels. Here at St. Martin de Porres, I would say that we are at 60% attendance. Over 100 people come to each of the three Sunday Masses, with the 11 AM Mass nearing 150. There is no doubt that the place of faith in American life has declined, in the lives of individuals, and in our society as a whole.

But two things can be true at once. One is that there is a decline. Two, there is also a hunger for meaning, for belonging. That's what we have to focus on and work on.

Among the leading reasons for switching a religious tradition or denomination, or stopping going to church at all are these. 56% say they stopped believing in the religion's teachings. 30% were turned off by perceived negative teachings or treatment people with same-sex attraction. 29% said that their family growing up was not that religious. 27% were disillusioned by scandals involving leaders in their former religion. And 18% pointed to a traumatic event in their lives. If God allowed this to happen to me, there must not be any God.

Specifically at St. Martin de Porres, our numbers are down for three primary demographic reasons.

First, our congregation is aging, and we average 70 funerals a year.

Secondly, many members of our congregation no longer are able to live independently, so they move in with their adult children or into assisted living.

Thirdly, the COVID-19 pandemic crushed us terribly. While the number of parishioners who died from COVID were few, it brought a halt to parish activities, home visits to the sick, and going to church. Since we are back to having public Masses, I have heard this question from formerly active folks: "Why dress up and go to church when you can watch it on TV in your pajamas and robe with a good cup of coffee?"

The worst abuse I heard of was the older couple, members of another parish, who take the leftover Christmas wafers (Oplatki) during the Mass, put it on a plate on the coffee table in front of the TV, and then after the priest consecrates the bread on TV, at communion time, they give each other the Christmas wafer, thinking that they are receiving Holy Communion. OY!

In spite of all these setbacks, I believe with all my heart that we are aging, we are changing, but we are NOT dying! *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!

We are reaching out to the unchurched and the fallen-away Catholics with gift books when they come at Christmas and Easter to awaken and to deepen their faith: "Prayers to Start Your Day," by Criswell Freeman, and Gus Lloyd's

fifth volume of “A Minute in the Church: Back to the Basics. “ More young singles and couples are attending, some couples with children. “Let the little children come to me.” And they do at the Children’s Liturgy of the Word which is available most Sundays at the 11:00 AM Mass. They are taking the summer off.

In the area of Stewardship, how to share and sacrifice your time, talent and treasure, I ask you to prayerfully discern how you will be able to participate more fully in our parish life. First and foremost, prayer is essential to our relationship with the Lord. Secondly, quality time with members of our family. Then our work. Finally, time for participation in parish activities. All of our parish ministries and services need additional members. We see the same people every weekend serving as Ushers, Lectors, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion and Altar Servers, but we need more. Many more! There is even a place for you in our music ministry! *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!

The Education Commission sponsored “Bring Your Parents to Class” sessions, which included praying the Holy Rosary together, walking through the Stations of the Cross, and a “Stump the Pastor” information night. I am three for three! Christian Formation students brought the Jesse Tree to our tree-trimming service in December during Sunday Mass. We collected hundreds of pounds of plastic bottles and cans to help the environment. The profits from turning them in allowed us to purchase many needed items for the church, including priest’s vestments and banners, which were not in our budget.

In addition to its regular outreach, the Christian Service Commission put together 250 Christmas gift bags for the residents of Autumn Woods Nursing Home. We have begun fund-raising and gathering items for the Vets Returning Home, who come from all areas of Macomb County, including Warren.

Thousands of dollars and tons of food were donated for our “Spirit of Giving Hope” holiday giving program at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

We also improved our church sound system, replaced pavers around the church, repaired and painted the light posts in our church parking lot, and removed dying and dangerous tree branches which were a safety hazard. We made the exterior and interior of our church, parish center and rectory burst into

color with fresh flowers and plants. The people of St. Martin de Porres are the most generous parishioners I have ever met in my 41 years of priesthood! Thank you and God bless you for that! *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!

Speaking of budgets, we had the worst year ever during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we, like all parishes, are still recovering from the devastating financial crisis that followed. Although our Sunday offertory income went down 50%, I am proud to say that there were no staff lay-offs the entire time. Every staff person kept their job, although there was a cut in pay and benefits to balance the budget.

Last year and this year have been a struggle to meet our weekly budgeted Sunday collection. In 2017, six years ago, we had 1,174 households with 2,349 individual members. This year, those numbers went south with only 693 parish households and 1,588 individual members. Again, in six years, we lost 481 households, mostly single widows and widowers, and we lost 761 individuals due to death or moving out of the area to live with adult children.

Our Sunday collection for the current year and for the next budget year
AMEN

I need us all, including myself, to step up to the plate to cover the deficit. Remember what our American Bishops have said for decades: a person who tithes gives 10% of their total income back to God. 5% goes to their favorite charities, 4% goes to the local parish, and 1% goes to the annual Catholic Service Appeal.

I ask you this week to get a calculator, do some calculating, and prayerfully consider how you can tithe your gift to God, who cannot be outdone in generosity. I covet and trust in your generosity and in your support! One parishioner asked if we are talking gross or net income! I will take net!

Last year, the Archdiocese of Detroit began a process called, "Families of Parishes." Existing parishes were teamed up into "families." Our family is St. Blase, St. Ephrem, and St. Michael Parishes, all in Sterling Heights, and us. We are called, "Saints among the Saints," from the First Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation. I am happy to say that all four pastors get along fine, and all four

parishes are working together to share our gifts with one another. This cannot be said of all Families of Parishes in the Archdiocese. Our parish finances are to be kept separate, with separate Parish Finance Councils, according to Canon Law. I believe with all my heart that this Family concept is a work of the Holy Spirit and an inspiration of Archbishop Allen Vigneron. Journey with me in this new chapter of our parish history. *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!

I read somewhere that there are four levels of happiness. The first comes from momentary pleasure. It's all about me, it's all about right now. Instant gratification.

The second level of happiness is the personal satisfaction I receive for a task well-done. I have used my God-given talents to the best of my ability.

The third level of happiness is making a difference by helping others. When I see a need and respond to it generously, I make the presence of God real for the other person. And they, in turn, do the same for me.

The highest form of happiness is union with God. This happens when we are fully human, fully alive, fully open to the Holy Spirit, and as Matthew Kelly puts it, "being the very best version of myself."

This is why Jesus Christ came; this is why He sends the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God will make us one with God. When we open ourselves to receive the Spirit of God, we will be strong enough to inspire and empower others. The Holy Spirit helps sinful people to receive the power of God to repent of their sins. The Advocate will help us to stand next to God, and to "Unleash the Gospel" in our parish, in our Archdiocese and in the world! *Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit! Breathe on us, O Spirit of God! AMEN! ALLELUIA!

[Readings: Acts 1:12-14, Psalm 87:1-3. 5-7; John 19:25-34]

For Catholics, the observance of Memorial Day echoes and combines elements of secular and religious observances half a year away, in November — Veterans Day on Nov. 11, All Saints' Day on Nov. 1 and All Souls' Day on Nov. 2. As in the former, we honor members of our armed forces. As in the Catholic feasts of early November, our focus is on those who have died -- in this case, while serving their country. It is also the Feast of Mary, Mother of the Church, portrayed in today's Gospel as Our Lady of Sorrows.

This is the time when medical technology has driven down the number of war casualties, and such casualties no longer reach indiscriminately into every city block as they would have during conflicts of centuries past, Memorial Day also is an invitation for Americans of all faith backgrounds to step with compassion and gratitude into the suffering of other's people's lives. Look at Ukraine for example.

Families who directly are touched on Memorial Day have made a sacrifice that cuts to their core and is almost unimaginable in the abstract -- the sacrifice of a young person, someone they loved and nurtured at every stage of his or her existence, the sacrifice of the joy and the bright future that life embodied in that family. All of it violently snuffed out. Please stand if you knew someone like this.

Then there are the deeper values and truths undergirding this sacrifice -- the deep love of a country that calls a young person to choose service in the armed forces; the belief that decency, freedom and human rights are worth promoting and defending; the belief that evil really exists in the world and requires us to respond with goodness. These all hold a place in the memories of the people we honor on Memorial Day, and they should inform the hearts of all of us who have the responsibility of living our lives in the peace and freedom for which they sacrificed.

Here the Church has provided a witness on how we can honor these sacrifices, a witness attuned to "signs of the times" that include the destructive capacity of modern weaponry.

Pope St. John XXIII wrote in his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) that “it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice.” His successor, Pope St. Paul VI, put a finer point on it in his famous 1965 address to the United Nations: “War. Never again war!”

Pope Francis echoed Paul’s words in his visit last fall to a U.S. military cemetery in Italy. And in his 2015 address to the U.S. Congress, he pressed the issue of our shared responsibility when he said, “Being at the service of dialogue and peace also means being truly determined to minimize and, in the long term, to end the many armed conflicts throughout our world.”

Working to end conflicts rather than stir them up and to promote true and lasting peace among nations is a daunting task. And while Christians can do much to promote nonviolence in our thoughts and actions toward others, as well as advocate for peace and diplomacy in our world, ultimately it all rises to prayer.

So together this Memorial Day, as we remember with gratitude those who sacrificed their lives, we join in this prayer for Memorial Day (“Catholic Household Blessings and Prayer,” USCCB Publishing):

“God of power and mercy, you destroy war and put down earthly pride. Banish violence from our midst and wipe away our tears. ... Keep in your mercy those men and women who have died in the cause of freedom and bring them safely into your kingdom of justice and peace.”

Mary, Divine Mother and Our Lady of Sorrows, pray for us.

Mary, Our Lady Queen of Peace, pray for us.

(Taken from a 2022 editorial by the Our Sunday Visitor Editorial Board)

Taps is a melody used at military funerals. There are no official lyrics to Taps, but the most popular ones are these: “*Day is done, gone the sun, From the hills, from the lakes, from the skies. All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.*” AMEN!