

# Memorial Day Mass

To Archbishop Edwin O'Brien I express deep gratitude for the invitation to join you today in remembering those who have died in the service of our beloved United States of America. We do so in the context of the word of God we have heard proclaimed just now and in the context of a world in which there are still threats to peace. It is a world where there is still need for vigilance, still need for the generosity of heart and discipline of spirit that characterize those who serve in our military forces.

For some years, more than twenty years ago, I was privileged to serve as an auxiliary chaplain to an air national guard unit. Their monthly drills, their special drills that took them half way around the world to prove their readiness, taught me how arduous is the role even of those whose commitment to the service is on a part-time basis.

Even more, I hear from those who now are chaplains of the generosity and of the love of country of those who serve in these days. Our first reading speaks of the Apostle Peter and an event set in the Middle East. How touched I was to learn from a Chaplain, Father Richard Spencer, from the Archdiocese of Baltimore, that his unit, some hundred strong like the Centurion's in the biblical account, was able to join the successor of St. Peter, Pope John Paul II, when he went on pilgrimage to Mt. Sinai. That our country has troops serving in a distant desert setting is one thing; that they are ready to take time to be reminded by a visit from the Holy Father of God's revealing word on Sinai is another, to which I shall return later on in these reflections.

In the first reading the Apostle Peter opens a new chapter in the life of the infant Church. He visits the household of Cornelius, following a vision granted him by God and an invitation from Cornelius. Cornelius was a military commander in the Roman army occupying ancient Palestine. He was a centurion, a Roman citizen commanding a unit of 100 men, of the cohort Italica. St. Luke describes him as "religious and God-fearing. The same was true of his whole household. He was in the habit of giving generously to the people and he constantly prayed to God." (Acts 10:1-2)

This good officer was directed by a mysterious messenger to send for St. Peter. At the same time the Apostle Peter was in Joppa, and had gone up to a roof terrace to pray. There he was granted a vision repeated three times of a great canvas lowered to the ground. On it were "all the earth's four-legged creatures and reptiles and birds of the sky." (Acts 10:12) A voice directed Peter to slaughter and to eat what he saw. He responded, "It is unthinkable! I have never eaten anything unclean or impure in my life." (Acts 10:14)

Peter was still pondering the meaning of the vision when the men sent by Cornelius arrived. The Holy Spirit instructed him to go with these men "unhesitatingly, for it is I who sent them." (Acts 10:19) And that is where our reading today begins. Peter preaches about Jesus and the meaning of his life when the Holy Spirit comes upon the household of Cornelius, preparing them for baptism. Uniquely, through the military unit posted in Palestine begins the Church's mission to the Gentiles, to the non-Jewish world.

In the second reading the Evangelist John talks about the surprising feature of God's love: that "God loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10)

The words of Jesus in the gospel touch directly the theme of this Memorial Day weekend: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Nearly 137 years have passed since President Abraham Lincoln evoked at Gettysburg the meaning to be drawn from the ultimate self-giving we remember today, "It is ... for us the living to be dedicated ... to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."

Whether in the War for Independence or in the