

Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 9, 2018
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 7:31-37

“Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” These words we heard today from the prophet Isaiah should serve to comfort us in this time of trial for the Church, as they are a reminder that even in the most difficult times the Lord is present and our enemy will not have the last word.

There are many instances in the history of the Church when this prophecy has been fulfilled, that the Lord saves His people who are living in fear, but today I want to share with you a particular incident from this week 335 years ago. The Lord came with the recompense of God and saved the faithful.

On our Lady’s birthday, 1683, the Ottoman Turks occupied one of the fortifications outside the city walls of Vienna. They had blown holes in that wall that were twelve meters wide, and they were preparing to take the city that was the gateway to Western Europe. Facing the 130,000 troops of the Ottoman Empire were 15,000 Viennese soldiers who refused to surrender because they knew they would all be slaughtered if they did.

As the Ottomans dug tunnels to place mines underneath the walls of Vienna, the Viennese defenders dug tunnels of their own, reached the mines, and disarmed them. This brilliant move bought them enough time for King John Sobieski to arrive with a combined force of Polish and German soldiers, most of whose pay checks came from the Pope, Blessed Innocent XI. On September 12, King John Sobieski arrived and promptly had Mass offered in the allied camp by Blessed Marco D’Aviano, the personal chaplain and counselor to the Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold I. Sobieski placed his army under the protection of our Blessed Mother.

The Allied and Ottoman forces fought from morning until evening, when Sobieski himself led the largest cavalry charge in history—20,000 men in all, which served to break the Ottoman lines and caused them to completely abandon their camp. They dispersed so quickly that only 5,000 Ottoman soldiers were captured. Sobieski wrote his wife to tell her that the Viennese defenders were so grateful that their commander hugged and kissed him and the common soldiers competed to kiss his hand.

To commemorate this great victory, Blessed Innocent XI designated September 12 the feast of the Holy Name of Mary, falling as it does only four days after our Blessed Mother’s birthday. The Pope also hailed Sobieski as the savior of Christendom, and his own words in this regard were prescient. The Ottoman Empire would never again threaten Western Europe, and the Battle of Vienna proved to be the turning point in a long struggle that issued finally in the dissolution of that Empire after the end of World War I in 1918. We will remember Sobieski’s heroics yet again this year when we celebrate on Wednesday the Feast of the Holy Name of Mary.

For a moment, though, I want you to think about the Viennese defenders between September 8 and their liberation four days later. Since all seemed lost, they made preparation for battle inside the city, anticipating that the walls would indeed be breached and they would fight to the last man in the streets of

Vienna. What they did not do was despair, lose hope, or surrender. They kept faith that their sacrifices would be rewarded; and after much waiting and watching, they were. The Lord used the instruments of Blessed Innocent XI, Blessed Marco D'Aviano, and John Sobieski to preserve His Church and prevent Christian lands from being ruled by those who deny the Divinity of Jesus Christ. September 12 represents for us a great victory, one of the turning points in history, one of those times that, according to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church and commemorated as such in the liturgical calendar, God intervened, saved us from our enemies, and proved our fears to be unfounded.

The attacks of September 11 were meant to obscure this reality, to get us to focus on the horrific losses we suffered that day seventeen years ago, rather than the celebration that should occur in every Christian nation on September 12 because of God's victory 335 years ago. Osama bin Laden lived by the sword and died by it, but he has been largely successful in turning what should be the Vigil of Christian gladness into a day of mourning. We ought to mourn our dead and pray for the repose of their souls, but we must not allow the anniversary of a terrorist attack to overshadow our Lady's Holy Name and the victory she ensured for the Church through her prayers. To focus on September 11 rather than on September 12 is to get it backwards, to focus on defeat and our weakness rather than on God's victory and His strength.

Bin Laden's infamy is in line with every emissary of the devil and serves as a metaphor for every struggle the Church has had to confront since its inception. The temptation we face in every crisis is to be crushed by the circumstances at hand, rather than remembering the great victory over sin and death that God won for us on Easter Sunday, which was the first fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic words that we heard this morning. We have nothing to fear, because our Lord has come and He has saved us—not just from enemies within who want to destroy the Church by their perversions, but also from the worst adversary of all, who has been chained and restrained, but who nevertheless wants us to concentrate on his outbursts instead of the recompense of God.

To focus on 9/11 or the scandal now rocking the Church, or any other setback in our 2,000-year history, is to treat Good Friday as if it were more momentous than Easter Sunday. Just as September 11 was the highpoint of the Muslim advance into Europe, Good Friday was the furthest advance of the devil. But that advance was immediately overshadowed by Jesus' triumph over the grave, and we have not thus far been so stupid as to confuse which was the more important. The same must be true for every trial we face.

Things look pretty bad right now, I know. But the Lord will save us. He has people lined up like Blessed Innocent XI, Blessed Marco D'Aviano, and John Sobieski to act as instruments of His grace to overcome the challenges besetting us. In time these modern-day saints will be revealed, and the Church will honor their victories, the victories God accomplishes through them, by adding them to the calendar of the Church. Every year in future generations their feasts will be celebrated, and their good works will far overshadow the tragic sins we now mourn. We must simply wait for it, just as the people of Vienna waited for September 12; and now the Church remembers their faith every year. Three hundred years from now may our descendants remember our faith.