

Homily for the Baptism of the Lord
January 10, 2021

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I wanted to talk about dreams today—dreams that parents have when they bring their children for baptism; dreams that new people who join our Church have because they find a place where hopes can and do come true. A place that tries to express the connection we have to each other because God calls us to be one.

But I can't talk today about dreams after the nightmare that occurred on Wednesday in our nation's Capital, when the Capitol building was stormed by rioters, by people with no regard for the life or safety of others, by thugs and vandals bent on insurrection and rebellion against our precious democratic way of life...with total disregard for what it means to be a true American.

Some may think, "Here goes Fr. Joe again with politics." It has nothing to do with politics, and everything to do with Catholic values in public life. Our Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) and the teachings of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) teach us that separation of Church and state does not require division between belief and public action; between moral principles and political choices; but protects the rights of believers and religious groups to act on their values in public life.

I used to work in the Capitol when I was a student at The American University in Washington, D.C. I wasn't a page or staffer, but under the patronage of Senator Howard Cannon of Nevada, I worked in the Senate Print Shop helping to set type and ink the presses, when they still used to do those things. They soon found out that I was horrible at my job and so I became the one who would go to the commissary every morning to get everyone coffee and sausage and egg sandwiches. And whenever the Senator wanted one I was sent to get it.

I also stood in lines at the Senate bookstore to buy mechanical pencils and tablets of paper so the Senator could continue to pump out more newspapers and letters; that paperwork that keeps our government running.

If I was late, you could park out front and run up those beautiful front stairs. There were no metal detectors then... and a parking ticket was much cheaper than the public parking lot.

I got to go to the attic in the Capitol and search for decades-old documents under piles of dust and spider webs and then take the shortcut to the Senate chambers by walking in the crypt, passing the Lincoln Catafalque, upon which he lay in state after his assassination in 1865.

I would often look up at the beautiful and hushed rotunda always seeing scaffolding and the painters doing their repairs—just like our government, in need of shoring up and fresh paint every once in a while.

I was present at the White House when President Ford welcomed Emperor Hirohito of Japan and Princess Nagako. My roommate Scott, who interned at the Council of International Economic Policy (CIEP) let me peek in the window of the Oval Office, that view we are all so familiar with. He once pulled me to the other side of the White House Rose Garden to show me the new outdoor swimming pool put in by President Ford, because he liked to swim outdoors.

I was present at Jimmy Carter's inauguration in 1977 and in the Rose Garden when he welcomed the Shah of Iran and the Shabanou, soon to be overthrown by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979.

On Wednesday we were *this close* to losing all of that and more, when people with no seeming knowledge or care for our heritage stormed and ransacked the greatest symbol of our democracy.

And when we lose *that*, it becomes like the time I was in the Peace Corps when the dictator of Paraguay blew away the former dictator of Nicaragua with an RPG, causing the Paraguay Secret Police to go to the homes of our host families, ransacking our rooms looking for weapons and "American Propaganda." Or like the time I was pulled off a bus in Argentina at gunpoint, my passport taken and my luggage spread on the ground, while the police took away a young man into the jungle.

If we lose *that*, it becomes like my time in Rome when the Carabinieri, the Italian Military Police, would club and gas African immigrants and Gypsies to get them out of the popular tourist spots. If we lose *that*, it becomes like the time my friend and I were stopped by our own U.S. Border Patrol, at the border crossing between the U.S. and Arizona. They tore the car panels apart and threw our luggage on the ground, just like they did in Argentina. They did it because they just couldn't believe that a Catholic Priest and a University Administrator from New York were just friends and not drug dealers.

Jesus says: "But I say to you love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you that you may be called children of God the most high."

The Catechism, in paragraph 2302, says "By recalling the commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill" our Lord asked for peace of heart and denounced murderous anger and hatred as immoral. If anger reaches the point of a deliberate desire to kill or seriously wound a neighbor, it is gravely against charity; it is a mortal sin."

The Catholic Church teaches us about the duties of citizens. The Catechism goes on to state in paragraph 2228: *Those subject to authority should regard those in authority as representatives of God, who has made them stewards of his gifts... Their loyal collaboration includes the right, and at times the duty, to voice their just criticisms of that which seems harmful to the dignity of persons and to the good of the community.*

(CCC 2229) *It is the duty of citizens to contribute along with the civil authorities to the good of society in a spirit of truth, justice, solidarity, and freedom. The love and service of one's country follow from the duty of gratitude and belong to the order of charity. Submission to legitimate authorities and service of the common good require citizens to fulfill their roles in the life of the political community.*

So maybe our worst nightmare as a country on Wednesday can still give way to the dreams we wish for today. The last time I went to D.C. was to lay to rest my friend Ray at Arlington National Cemetery. He was a simple Navy hospital corpsman taking care of the wounded in battles on Midway Island during WWII and later during four tours in Viet Nam.

There are still true patriots and heroes among us this day. We cannot... We can never... take our democracy and all it means for granted. If we do we will lose everything we dream about.

In his 1861 inaugural address President Lincoln, desperately trying to avoid civil war, closed his speech with these words—words that we have heard and that have become more familiar over these last few years...maybe because we need to hear them. Lincoln said, “I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad Land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

We were *this close*, and maybe even lost a bit of who we are. We can never take who we are or where we live for granted ever again. For if we do, we will lose everything, in our Church, and in our nation, that we dare dream is possible.