

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR THE FEAST OF SAINTS PHILIP AND JAMES, APOSTLES
30TH RED MASS OF THE DIOCESE OF SHREVEPORT
HOLY TRINITY CATHOLIC CHURCH
SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA – MAY 3, 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Greetings! Thank you, Bishop Malone, for your kind invitation to be with you today, and to join your priests, deacons, the religious, and lay faithful of the Diocese of Shreveport. Special greetings to the judges, lawyers, and public servants for whom we offer this “Red Mass”. Welcome to our brothers and sisters from other Christian communities, to members of the Jewish faith, and to all other believers and people of good will whose presence here helps us to express our unity as children of the one God. Allow me to convey to everyone here, as the Pope’s personal representative to the United States, the spiritual closeness and affection of Pope Francis.

Our celebration today is rich with the story of *martyrs*. In the Catholic liturgical calendar, today is the feast of two martyred Apostles, Philip and James. Our honorees at this year’s Mass are five additional martyrs who are dear to the people of this city and this Diocese: those five priests who, during the yellow fever epidemic of 1873, gave their lives out of love for their brothers and sisters who were suffering. They willingly surrendered their physical lives so that others could attain the spiritual life that God gives through faith and Baptism.

What is a “martyr”? In the original Greek, “martyr” is a word that means *witness*. In the early history of the Church, Christians adopted the word “martyr” to refer especially to a disciple who had given witness to their faith in Jesus to the point of being killed for that faith. As we know, many of the earliest Christians were killed for their faith; and ever since then, in different parts of the world, death remains the penalty of some who profess the Gospel of Jesus. We rightly honor those who die for the greatest cause of all – that of Christ – and we extol them as martyrs.

In today's passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples: "Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do."¹ This prophecy was fulfilled in a particular way through the martyrdom of the Apostles. The greatest of the "works" of Jesus was his saving death on the cross. His Apostles followed him in this "work", offering their own lives in various kinds of death as a result of preaching his message of salvation. The Apostle James, to whom Jesus appeared after his Resurrection, and the Apostle Philip, whose question prompted Jesus' words in today's Gospel, were two of the Apostles who followed in the "work" of Jesus, giving their lives for his Gospel.

The wonderful thing about Christian martyrs is that they remain witnesses to future generations. Long after their deaths, their witness to Christ lives on and inspires us. In the context of this Mass, in which we pray for judges, lawyers, and public officials, we can allow the example of the martyrs to remind us what public service is about. A public servant, a professional of the law, offers their education and understanding of the law for the service of the community and individuals: for justice, for the protection of human rights, and in particular to safeguard the rights and dignity of those who otherwise would be discriminated against or forgotten.

In this way, we can see that those in the legal and public service professions can also be, in a sense, "martyrs" or witnesses. There are indeed "red martyrs", like the Apostles and the Shreveport Martyrs, who "shed their blood" – literally *died* – for the Gospel of Christ. But in the Church we also understand a kind of martyrdom that does *not* involve bloodshed. It is the vocation of those who, without literally dying for the Gospel, nonetheless are willing to "die" to themselves each day in order to manifest the life and the charity of Jesus. So we can still be "martyrs" – witnesses – to the love of Christ, no matter what our job is, no matter what vocation God has given us. In this way, we enjoy a communion of life and love with the Apostles, with the Shreveport martyrs, and with all the saints in heaven who have gone before us in faith.

¹ *John* 14:12.

This kind of witness is the call of every Christian. Indeed, it is the call of everyone who believes in God, as spoken by the Prophet Isaiah in the first reading of this Mass (which we heard in the Hebrew language). In that passage, the Prophet articulates the call this way: “Make justice your aim; redress the wronged, hear the orphan’s plea, defend the widow.”² This is an exhortation most appropriate to those of you in legal and public service professions, for whom we pray in this Mass. But it is a call for all of us, whom God equips to be witnesses of love and truth. To do so, we are inspired by the example and strengthened by the intercession of the holy Apostles, the martyrs of Shreveport, and all other witnesses to God’s glory.

² *Isaiah* 1:17.