

“Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom. But we proclaim Christ crucified.” I want to preach on that Crucified Christ from our second reading today in relation to the mass. [Fr. John Richardo opens his week three homily with a clip from the film “Saving Private Ryan,” but since we don’t have that capability I want to describe it for those who haven’t seen it.] The movie, loosely based on a true-life situation in WWII, focuses on the Ryan family that had three of its four sons killed in action – and the fourth son had just parachuted behind the Normandy beach on D-Day. The Army decided that no family should lose all its children, so a small team of soldiers led by Captain John Miller (played by Tom Hanks) is sent into the bloody chaos of the battle to somehow find Private James Ryan and get him out alive.

The movie ends with Captain Miller finding Ryan and rescuing him only to fall to an enemy bullet. He lies dying on a bridge in a French town as the battle rages – Ryan standing over him. Capt. Miller motions Ryan to draw close and then whispers, “James, earn this. Earn it!” Then

dies. The movie then fades from Ryan's eyes taking in his rescuer's words to make his life worthy of the sacrifice, to a modern day, older, James Ryan at a Normandy military cemetery with rows and rows of white crosses. Ryan is now standing in front of the cross at Miller's grave. His wife, kids, and grandkids hover in the distance. He has brought them France with him on this journey of homage. Ryan tells Miller, and that white cross, "Every day I think of what you said to me on that bridge. I hope I've earned what you did for me." Breaking down he calls his wife over and asks her, "Am I a good man? Did I lead a good life?" "Yes, you are," she says, somewhat uncomprehendingly. Then Ryan salutes the cross of Captain Miller.

Let us begin in prayer, "Holy Spirit help us to understand what is going on in our lives and where we are, and what we're doing here." What does God want from us? We can suspect His agenda. Remember two weeks ago in the first Rerouting homily – how I said that many of us don't know what's going on at mass. We don't understand what it is.

We don't know the story or get the ritual. Today I want to begin that exploration by explaining the Mass.

The mass is not an empty ritual. If we understand it, the mass reveals better than anything else God's agenda for us – what He wants for, and from, us. And the story of Private Ryan presents that meaning in a way that might help our imaginations get it better. The whole movie is actually a flashback. It begins with this older man – whom we don't recognize coming to this military cemetery, looking for a grave. It's not the grave of the Unknown Soldier, but the grave of the man who died so he could live. He has remembered the sacrifice.

The concluding scenes of the film are moving, I get a little misty-eyed watching it. Perhaps you did as well – I hope you have seen the film or will see it (although it's a violent movie not meant for children). Why does it move us? Because it gives us an authentic response to such a great sacrifice. It shows us what that response should look like. But even deeper, it shows that our lives matter. They have weight. They

count for something heavy and great – worthy of giving and receiving such sacrifice.

Remember last week when I preached about the healthy and unhealthy meanings of our religious words? What about the “Mass?” What is your definition of the Mass? Is it healthy or unhealthy? A healthy meaning of the Mass is that movie and conclusion played out in the real world. What is portrayed on that French bridge is what happens at every mass multiplied infinitely – and it has the power to change and move us oh so much more powerfully. The movie is a flashback. The mass is not a flashback. The mass take place on the bridge. It’s the battle. And we’re really there! At every mass we’re on the hill of Calvary, watching Jesus sacrifice Himself for us – individually. Captain Miller wasn’t sent out to save some generic soldier. He was sent out for a particular man with a name. Christ didn’t die for a crowd, a race, or a species. He died for Kurt, for Bill, Suzy, and Ellen. And the event achieving that is happening right now, here in this church, mysteriously,

in an unbloody way. The mass is, first and foremost, Jesus' offer of His life to the Father for our sins to save us from everlasting death.

True, Jesus isn't saying from the cross to us, "James, earn it. Earn this" We can't earn something so great. It's impossible. But what Jesus does say from the cross -- to each of us is, "Respond to this. Respond to this sacrifice of mine -- with your life." That is God's agenda for you. He's not trying to control you or take away your freedom or pleasure. He is trying to win your heart – every heart, not with words, but with a great deed, showing His love for you. From the cross Jesus wants to tell each of us, "You matter. You are worth saving." This moment and mass is an encounter with Jesus as no other on earth. It's not an empty ritual, but Jesus demonstrating that nobody loves me like He loves me. Jesus has come to rescue us from sin, death, hell, despair, and fear.

But often we come to mass like Ryan's family came to the cemetery, knowing it's important, but not knowing what happened or

why they are there, feeling it was all about someone else, not knowing the story.

So where are we right now? Like Ryan, we're standing in front of a cross, or rather, at the foot of the cross – and we're being confronted by it and invited to surrender to Jesus' love – and to hold up to Jesus this life of ours that He saved – just as Ryan asked his wife to testify to his life. The mass is an invitation to respond to such love.

None of this makes sense without faith. But more than something we believe, faith is something we do. Why? God always acts first. All we can do is respond. That response to God is faith. Today let us respond in one way at least. After communion when Jesus is with us as at no other time, pray to the Holy Spirit. Close your eyes and ask the Spirit to help to know Jesus, and change, respond to Jesus in some way – that His ultimate sacrifice for you might not have been in vain.