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Homily – 20th Anniversary of September 11th
September 11, 2021
Holy Rood Cemetery, Westbury, New York

1. The theological virtues of faith, hope, and love have “the One and Triune God for their origin, motive, and object.”¹ These virtues are from God and directed to God. They animate the life of every believer. They drive the life and missionary spirit of the Church.

These virtues – faith, hope, and love - bring us together today to celebrate Mass at this 9/11 memorial. They assist us in this hallowed place to pray for our family members and all of the 2,977 souls who perished on September 11, 2001 in New York, Washington, D.C., and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and to pray for those who have died from 9/11-related illnesses in the last two decades.

Yes, faith, hope, and love have gathered us here to pray with and through the Lord Jesus, so that, as He offers Himself to the Father at this Mass, we may offer with Him – faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly - prayers for our beloved dead and a firm petition that grace, wisdom, consolation, and peace be granted to us, our country, and the world.

With faith, hope, and love, we anticipate, too, our September 14th celebration of the Feast of the Exaltation or Triumph of the Holy Cross and the September 15th Memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows. Mindful that we are to be, in the words of St. Paul, *ambassadors of Christ* and ambassadors of the Triumph of the Holy Cross in history.

2. As we remember the twentieth anniversary of that tragic day, these virtues, faith, hope, and love, which animate and gather us, can serve, too, as a lens. They can focus our thoughts and prayers. They can help us see God in the midst of confusion and heartache. They can remind us of our path forward, which entails, now as always, walking as faithful, hopeful, and loving missionary disciples of Jesus Christ.

What are these theological virtues?

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1813.

“Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us.”² This virtue frees us from a limited, this-world only vision. It opens us to the fullness of Truth, and provides the consolation of knowing where we come from, how we are to live, and where we are going. Faith transforms everything. Gifted with it, we are called to keep the faith, constantly grow in faith, and unceasingly bear witness to it.

“Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.”³

Hope changes how we live now. Far from detaching us from the present, it imbues our thoughts and actions with purpose based on the promise of what is to come. Every true realist always has a burning desire for Heaven, a burning desire for Eternal Life. Hope keeps us “from discouragement; it sustains [us] in times of abandonment; it opens up [our] hearts in expectation of eternal beatitude.”⁴

Love or “charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God.”⁵ It is the new commandment given by Christ the night before he died and supremely shown by Him on the Cross.

Love is superior to all other virtues. It is the first virtue, St. Paul tells us, and without it, the Apostle to the Gentiles says clearly, we are nothing: *a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal*.⁶

3. Perhaps definitions make these virtues seem distant, but we know them. They are familiar. They are part of our daily lives, and faith, hope, and love were part of September 11th in a myriad of ways. Think only of the story of Father Mychal Judge, who represents every first-responder who died that day and who we pray for at this Mass.

Faith animated and transformed Father Judge’s life. His vocation as a Capuchin priest was born from it, and faith convicted him as a FDNY chaplain to be present to the chaos, confusion, and darkness that overwhelmed that bright, sunny,

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1814.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1817.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1818.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1822.

⁶ 1 Cor 13:1

September day. Father Judge knew the gift of faith, and he bore witness to it. Firefighters and others would have seen this virtue alive in the man and in the priest first-responder as he prayed in the lobby of the North Tower. They would have seen, too, hope. His presence alone testified to it: Someone living differently because of the victory of Christ. Finally, they would have witnessed love, and in his passing, they saw a love of which there is none greater, namely, laying down one's life for one's friends.⁷

Father Judge's story - so well known - is but one in which the theological virtues shone radiantly that day. He stands for the multitude taken from us, each of whom showed faith, hope, and love in their lives.

The dead, bleeding body of this priest, who had celebrated and lived the rhythm of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, was carried and then reverently laid at the foot of the Altar of Sacrifice at St. Peter's Church on Barclay Street, the oldest Catholic Church in New York.⁸

This beautiful gesture reminds us as we commemorate this 20th Anniversary of 9/11, as we pray for the souls we remember and love, as we celebrate this Mass together, that the Catholic Mass, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, is the true way of all our loves, all of our griefs, and all of our Crosses on earth.⁹ The greatest tribute we can make to those who died on 9/11 is to be radically faithful to the Mass, radically faithful to the Eucharist.

4. The virtues were lived by those who perished, and faith, hope, and love were displayed in the days, weeks, months, and years that followed 9/11.

How powerful it is to remember the faith that carried us as families, communities, and as a country. How instinctively so many turned to the Lord and lived the gift of faith!

How beautiful it was to see the virtue of hope in the midst of ashes, destruction, and pain. In those days, we lived the beatitudes, which we heard in today's Gospel. Those familiar sayings of the Lord, so filled with hope, "trace[d] the path that leads through the trials that await the disciples of Jesus."¹⁰ They pointed us to what is to come.

⁷ John 15:13

⁸ Cf. Bishop Michael Saltarelli's "The Spiritual Lessons of September 11: A Pastoral Statement on the One-Year Anniversary," *The Dialog*, September 5, 2002, 6-7.

⁹ Cf. A quote from J.R.R. Tolkien in James T. O'Connor, *The Hidden Manna: A Theology of the Eucharist*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 336-337.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1820.

How uplifting it was in those days to see love prevail. How many unknown Good Samaritan acts of charity and kindness were shown! How easily the Lord's new commandment was followed. How we loved one another as He loved us. How powerful it is to share those Gospel Good Samaritan parables of 9/11 with future generations.

5. Recalling the theological virtues lived by those who died, and seeing how the virtues were present in the aftermath of that horrific day, we are reminded on this twentieth anniversary to live the gifts of faith, hope, and love bestowed on us by God. For we are called to let these theological virtues unfold within us, and so be, through our faith, hope, and love, salt and light to the entire world.

6. Our Mass is celebrated at this beautiful memorial where names are inscribed in granite, just as they are inscribed forever in our hearts.

At the center of the memorial sits the Pietà. In this famous artistic depiction of the Mother and her Son, the Blessed Virgin Mary displays the virtues we remember today and which we are called to live, as she tenderly holds and caresses the body of Our Lord.

She personifies faith, hope, and love. Our Lady was present at the foot of the Cross. She is present with us now. May she intercede for us.

And may all the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace. Let perpetual light shine upon them, upon their families, upon all their loved ones, and upon the world. Amen.