This morning, on our University’s campus, we celebrated the funeral of David Petzold, the first police officer ever killed in the line of duty in Upper Saucon Township. It was truly a sight to behold, as vehicles approached the campus under a flag-draped arch of fire engine ladders, as bagpipers and drummers called the thousand-strong congregation to worship, as the honor guard in full dress uniform led the procession, and as police officers by the hundreds solemnly filed by the casket for a “final call” in salute to their fallen colleague.

Such an outpouring of sympathy for the officer and his young family was a fitting tribute to someone whose career meant putting his life on the line for others. Yet it was also profoundly ironic. As his partner had whispered to me, Dave would be the least of anyone to want all that attention. In fact, some years back he quit a higher profile job with the FBI to return to the simpler, yet quite meaningful tasks of community policing. Little did he know then that his humble service would be recognized with such solemn pageantry ... and would provide such a newsworthy lesson.

But this is more than a news story. Rather, it is a timely and close-to-home confirmation of the good news in the Gospel reading for today (Luke 17:7-10). And it gives impetus to what we are doing here in this annual novena at Our Lady of Pompeii.

In the Gospel, Jesus concludes his teaching to the disciples with this admonition: “When you have done all you have been commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.” At first, this might seem harsh. It almost sounds like a put down. Just do what you’re supposed to do and don’t think that you’re a big deal. After all, you are merely servants.

That doesn’t sound very inspiring. Yet it surely is. Today I saw evidence of it. Tonight you live by it.
You see, Jesus was not putting the disciples down or rendering them insignificant. Instead, he was reminding them that their place, rightly understood, is to be disciples. Their significance and their honor will be found precisely in their obedient service to God and to others. If they would but do what they are supposed to do — which is to love God and love one another as God loves them — then the whole world would be transformed.

And, though it may sound odd, that is precisely how Jesus lives and the model that he exemplifies for us. He did what he was supposed to do ... and we know that it changed the world. He became man because he was supposed to, for in God’s providential plan of creation, the Incarnation would bring us into the fullness of time. He died on the cross because he was supposed to, for in God’s plan of salvation, death would be overcome for all through the Resurrection. To put it simply: Jesus loved us as God is supposed to love — totally, perfectly, eternally.

What, then, by comparison, are we supposed to do? Well, each one of us is called to be a saint, to live a life of holiness according to our own state-in-life. In our lives, though, it’s unlikely that we will have the opportunity for great and heroic deeds. Instead, we struggle with ordinary cares and concerns, we spend our days doing ordinary tasks, and we live our lives in ordinary ways. So be it. For when we do the ordinary extraordinarily well (as St. Francis de Sales reminds us), when we provide caring service to our neighbors wherever we find them, when we do what we’re supposed to do out of love for God and one another ... it is then that holiness shines in our midst (and it shines even more brilliantly than the red and blue flashing lights of more than 100 police cars).

A critical component of that “ordinary” holiness is what we did this morning and what we are doing here this evening. I vividly recall the police officers who, after saluting their colleague officially, later came back, knelt down, and made a sign of the cross. Praying and giving worship to God — this is what we are all supposed to do. It’s evidence of our gratitude for the gift of our lives that God has given us (however long or short they may be). It’s an expression of our faith in the God who will always provide for us.

So tonight, and throughout this novena, let us pray in thanksgiving for all the unnamed saints that we have known — those who have touched our lives in some special way by their loving service and humble virtue. And let us pray, too, for ourselves, that we may have the grace to live our ordinary lives extraordinarily well ... to do all that we are supposed to do with love.

+ May God Be Blessed +

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