

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, November 10, 2024**  
Remembrance Sunday

**Solemn Eucharist**  
11:00 am

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia

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## **Politics and Reconciliation**

Several years ago, when I was still teaching at Sant'Anselmo in Rome, I made a short trip to an Austrian Benedictine monastery to attend the monastic profession of one of my former students. On my way back, I thought I would make a stopover in Salzburg, Mozart's birthplace, which I had never visited before.

As soon as I left the train station and reached the city center, though, there suddenly was one of the worst downpours I remember. Hundreds of tourists scrambled for cover in bars and restaurants and I found myself competing for a spot under the awning of a shop, completely soaked and utterly miserable.

At the first intermission in the deluge, I spotted the funicular that takes visitors from the city center to the Hohensalzburg Fortress, an impressive medieval castle that overlooks the city. I was so fed up with the weather that almost without thinking I boarded on it and ended up spending the day inside that fortress where, among other things, I found a fascinating puppet museum.

Curiously though what caught my attention most was the Reiner-Regimentsmuseum dedicated to the Salzburg imperial and royal infantry regiment Archduke Reiner. I have never found military museums particularly inspiring, but in this case, there was a fascinating exhibition of photos, documents, heirlooms, letters that had belonged to soldiers who had fought on the Tyrolian front during the first world war – a war, you might remember, that the Austrian fought against the Italians.

What most nations think of as World War 1, for Italy was in fact the fourth war of independence against the Austrian domination in the North of the country. It resulted in the territorial shape that my country has kept ever since. The unimaginable suffering endured by soldiers in that war and its catastrophic death toll were still very much part of the living memory of older people during my childhood. The history books at school uniformly presented the Austrian as the enemies.

All of the sudden that morning, in that exhibition and for the first time in my life, I was exposed to how that war was perceived on the opposite side: I was part of the nation that had broken ranks from the empire, I was portrayed as the attacker, the instigator of the war – I was the enemy. This not only in the official narrative, but in the everyday perception people had of those events – a perception that transpired especially in the sorrowful and moving letters of soldiers, families, friends and lovers that were part of the exhibition.

To be enemies takes two.

Just as growing up I was given a narrative that justified why the Austrian were wrong, why our war against them was legitimate – so did they. We know the formidable power of propaganda, especially in times of war or, indeed, in times of political elections.

Politics should not be a war but the reality is that the advent of social media powered by algorithms indifferent to values and only aimed at maximizing interactions has created echo-chambers in which each side is exposed only to one narrative. We have reached the point that even in politics we routinely talk of cultural wars, berate those who disagree with us, give over to intransigent partisanship.

Now I imagine what some of you might be thinking: there is right and there is wrong, we have the duty to uphold justice, equality, freedom, inclusion, the preservation of human dignity, the environment – we have to disavow and eradicate all forms of racism, homophobia, transphobia, antisemitism, islamophobia – the list is long. These values are non-negotiable. Tragically sometimes the need to defend these values requires nations to go to war – peace and democracy depend on them.

Politics though has been devised precisely as a way to prevent war. Politics is based on the presupposition that however opposed our views might be, the only legitimate way of dealing with disagreement is civility, negotiation, deliberation, and ultimately compromise.

Again some might wonder: is this kind of politics still possible in this era of extreme partisanship, of cultural wars, of echo-chambers, of the baneful influence of social media on public opinion?

Looking at the course of democracies in most countries, including Italy, today we might be tempted by pessimism. And yet, precisely the theme of today's celebration, *remembrance Sunday*, should open our eyes to another possibility.

Today, we remember the victims of all wars, those who fought for us, those who fought against us. This reminds us that war remains a tragic possibility when the only narratives that drive our nations are those for whom the enemies are the others.

In the light of the Word of God though we are invited to a *remembrance* that goes much further and deeper. In the reading from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans we have just been reminded of something that you will never hear outside these walls, namely that

“*While we were all enemies, we were reconciled with God*” (Romans 5.10).

As I hear these words, I look around me – I see you who are with me today, I think of those who are worshipping with us online, and realize what a blessing it is to be part of a community here at Saint Thomas in which these are not empty words but assurances that shape our lives.

Think just for a moment.

In how many other places in this country and in the world, in this particular moment in our history, can you find an intentional gathering of people who irrespectively of their race, gender, political allegiance, and social standing can pray together, look each other in the eye to exchange the sign of peace, eat the same bread, drink at the same cup, proclaim the same faith?

In how many other places is such a diverse gathering of people reminded (remembrance again) of a narrative which no propaganda, no social media, no algorithm is able to contaminate – because it is

the narrative proclaimed by the living Word of God – a Word that judges all of us, that to all of us says: “You were enemies” only to emphasize that *now* you, we, all of us are *reconciled* – that is actively, passionately, unremittingly committed to *keep* being reconciled with each other and with God.

In how many other places can we hear words and perform actions that have the power to speak to each one of us where we are now, whatever our side.

In this place today those who are hopeful can give thanks to the Lord: this is the meaning of the word *eucharist*, where our work, our lives, our choices are purified and offered by Christ as a sacrifice agreeable to God.

In this place today, those who are grieving, anxious, heartbroken are given words to express their pain:

*My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord.” (Lamentations 3.17f)*

In which other place then both those who are hopeful and those who are grieving are also invited together to see wider and further – to see history in the light of the Word of God?

The book of Lamentations gives voice to affliction and grief – but then invites us to go beyond what *comes to heart and mind* and choose what we should *call to heart and mind* – and here we reach the deeper meaning of *remembrance*:

*But this I call to mind – says Lamentations – and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” (Lamentations 3>21-24)*

This kind of remembrance is what makes what we are doing here at Saint Thomas today so special, so powerful, so unique: what we call to mind, what we choose to remember, or rather to be reminded of by the Word of God – is that hope, reconciliation, renewal remain possible because our human tendency to see each other as opponents, even as *enemies*, is not an obstacle for God – “While we were *all* enemies, we were reconciled with God” (Romans 5.10). Hope, reconciliation, and renewal are gifts the Lord constantly pours on us, ready for us to be embraced, capable of giving us a new identity, as individuals and as a community.

This is the narrative we need to remind ourselves and the world of.

This reconciliation is not a utopia – it is at work here, now, in this place: we are gathered as one family, one community, one body.

This reconciliation is a mission: it offers us guidance and inspiration, strengthens our courage and our resilience, permeates the way we seek justice. The way we can bring it with us to our families, in our workplaces, in our approach to politics is simple: an unwavering commitment to kindness, compassion, and care for everyone we meet in our daily life.

Remember: what we are empowered with is not our kindness, but God’s kindness – not our compassion, but God’s compassion, not our peace, but God’s peace.

