

GAS Letter for July 2017 Intercession Paper

Dear Fellow Members of the Guild:

The July number of our Intercession Paper always begins with us looking forward to our Annual Requiem in November, and I hope that those of you who can will make plans to be with us for the next Annual Requiem at the Guild's National Shrine, The Church of the Resurrection, Park Avenue and East 74th Street, in New York, on Saturday, 11 November 2017 at 11.00 a.m. At this writing, the music of the Mass has yet to be determined but I am quite sure that our fully professional choir under the direction of David Enlow, who is also a Guild Council member, will be more than up to the task. They offer sixty or so different mass settings every year, from Plainsong and Polyphony, Baroque music, Mozart and Haydn, some Nineteenth Century composers, and even some Twentieth Century composers, like Poulenc and Britten, and also cross-cultural pieces like the Russian Gretchaninoff masses and the Traditional melodies of the Belgian Congo which were worked into the Missa Luba by Father Guido Haazen, OFM. A luncheon will be served afterwards for those minded and able to remain.

As the day and time of our meeting suggest, we can scarcely not begin without the proper ceremonies of that day and time, which have taken place now for 99 years. It will be the 99th anniversary of the end of the Great War at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Next year, we shall all be celebrating the centenary of the end of the War, although celebrating is not the right word really, commemorating would be a better one. This war, which was so unnecessary and so desperate, nearly destroyed Western European culture completely, and in a sense there was simply a twenty-one year armistice until arms were taken up again, as the seeds of the 1939-1945 War were already planted at the end of the Great War. As a result, we shall begin with the customary two minutes' silence and its haunting conclusion, "They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them..." This promise has been kept now for nearly a hundred years, and in remembering the dead, both military and civilian, there is explicit in the memory and prayer, one that is also for peace in the world, which we need as much to-day as ever and which is as endangered to-day as ever, whether from Syria, North Korea, or just the ever-present terrorism which manifests itself anywhere in the world at any time without a moment's notice, whether it is a few people in London, a summertime crowd in Nice or a Christmas market in Berlin, thousands of people at one moment in New York and Washington, a railway station in Madrid, a nightclub in Orlando, a crowd in Istanbul or a single brave French policeman at the wrong place at the wrong time in the Champs-Élysées just a few months ago. What we lived through in New York sixteen years ago perhaps makes us more sensitive to this, but I think we share this feeling with every human being, the feeling of recoiling from the horror of evil, and the seemingly banal and quotidian face of evil as it strikes. Looking at film reports at both the recent outrages in London and Paris, I myself thought of the by now countless times I myself have stood at that very corner by the Palace of Westminster, and I recognised on television the exact spot on the Champs-Élysées, a spot I had walked by many a time over the years on many happy visits to Paris. A priest friend wrote me from London how horrible it seemed that a perfectly ordinary object like a motorcar or an aeroplane, which we use all the time for peaceful purposes, suddenly becomes a weapon of death and destruction.

All of this raises a question which we must answer if we are being honest about our feelings. How do we pray, even pray for the departed we love, when we are full of anger and the desire for revenge for a desperate, evil and cowardly act? In a tour de force, though brief, address at the secular state memorial service for the French policeman, Xavier Jugelé, this was addressed openly and by the person who mourned him most. Addressing himself to the terrorists, Etienne Cardiles said, "You will not have my hatred, I will not give it to you", and urged all to do the same: "Let us all stay worthy and let us keep peace." And Cardiles said to the deceased hero, "I don't have hate, Xavier, because it's not like you - It's not what's in your heart."

In New York and other places now (far too many) a surprising number of people have lost friends and loved ones to terrorist action, and are faced with this same problem. It is difficult, if not impossible, to pray for the soul of the departed and not make peace with what has happened. That's rather the trick of prayer, when you enter into conversation with God, you have to remember that it is a two-way street, and prayer may take you to places you had not foreseen or intended to go. Very often, in order for us to get to the point that we are making sincere and heart-felt prayers to God for our dear dead, we must forgive first.

Any parish priest can also tell you that another part of this is that we cannot pray for the dead whilst we remain angry with God himself. There are times when a very elderly person dies, someone who has had a very long and exhausting battle with illness, or someone who has been quite seriously injured in an accident, when it is fairly easy for us to realise that what has happened has been for the best, much as we shall miss the deceased. It is far more often, though, that someone dear to us dies, and we find that the emotion that is most to the fore in our hearts is anger and resentment, perhaps against God. When I was a hospital chaplain at St Luke's Hospital in Morningside Heights, Father Al Hart, of whom I was very fond, used to say that it was so unfortunate that the very time that people so often asked the question of God, "Why?", it was the very time that one could not possibly give the only real answer, which is, "Why not?" In other words, why should we claim a special privilege guarding our loved one from an experience which millions face all the time? Why should our dear friend or family member be exempt from common human experiences everyone else must face? To put it simply: who are we to demand special treatment from God? If we sit calmly and think of these matters, we shall see at once that this is obvious, and yet at the very moment when we are desperately seeking answers, neither our minds nor our hearts are unclouded enough to see this truth. So it takes a period of time for us to come to that place. It also may be, and we hear this increasingly, that it is regarded as an insult to suggest that the deceased was a sinner. This is particularly odd – if he or she was not a sinner, why should we pray for their souls? They would need nothing from God if they had died perfect, in a state of grace. We know, however, that only children under the age of reason die in this state. If we are older than that, then we are sinners to one extent or another, therefore praying for the dead for the remission of their sins is not an insult in any way, it is an assertion that they were human beings, and that human beings are fallible, imperfect, and therefore sinners.

All of this reminds us that prayer for the dead has so many important aspects, and though it is the paramount one, simply prayer for the repose of their souls, is but one. Its other effects are manifold: prayer changes us too, it forces us to forgive, it forces us to face our ideas of our privileged existence, the myth of our own immortality, the illusion (which we must have in order to carry on living) that accidents and terrible illness will not strike us, and above all, that our loved one, now dead, must be surrendered to God. We would scarcely, in our lucid moments,

suggest that we are so selfish that we would prefer to have the living with us rather than moving on in their pilgrimage towards God, and yet that thought is a very difficult one to summon when we are grieving. It is prayer for the dead, both at Requiem Masses, and privately, that begins to move us to the place where we realise exactly that – that we are called to keep our love and our memories – but yield our dead up to God. He made them in his own image, He has been their food on their pilgrimage and the medicine for their souls, his Sacraments have strengthened them, and He is their destination. None of this is easy, no one would pretend that, and the more one has lost, the deeper the grief, the more difficult it becomes. On the other hand, there are really only two alternatives with the death of a loved one: moving towards the peace of God which passeth all understanding, and holding anger, resentment or bitterness in our hearts because of our loss. To the believing Christian, there is only the one choice, but it does not come naturally, it is a goal for which we must work, and that work is prayer.

Yours in the Holy Souls,

The Reverend Canon Barry E. B. Swain, SSC
Superior-General

ANNUAL REQUIEM MASS OF THE GUILD OF ALL SOULS
SATURDAY, 11 NOVEMBER 2017 AT 11.00 A.M.

CHURCH OF THE RESURRECTION,
119 EAST 74TH STREET (AT PARK AVENUE)
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

SERMON: THE REV'D DR J. PETER PHAM, COUNCIL MEMBER
ASSISTANT, ST PAUL'S CHURCH, WASHINGTON, D.C.

MUSIC FROM RESURRECTION'S PROFESSIONAL CHOIR TO BE ANNOUNCED

LUNCHEON WILL FOLLOW, NO RESERVATIONS REQUIRED