

(GAS Letter for July Intercession Paper)

My dear Fellow Members of the Guild:

I normally begin this letter to you in July to give first notice of our Annual Requiem Mass for the year. I can indeed do so as we shall be meeting on Saturday, 12 November 2016, at All Saints' Church, Ashmont, in the Dorchester section of Boston, at the kind invitation of Father Michael Godderz, SSC, a long-time member of our Council, and also the Master of the North American Province of the SSC (Societas Sanctae Crucis – often known by the English translation Society of the Holy Cross, but even more often by its Latin acronym SSC). Father Godderz was previously Rector of St Bride's Church, Chesapeake, Virginia, and served his title at the Church of the Advent, Boston. We are very grateful for his kind invitation, and those of you who have not yet seen his church after its many cosmetic improvements and restorations, will find that it is rather like seeing an elderly parishioner who has been off for various physical procedures and expert plastic surgery! We had the pleasure of having our SSC Synod there last September, and the work was just concluding then so should be entirely finished by this autumn. All Saints' renowned Choir of Men and Boys will be singing under the baton of Mr Andrew Sheranian who produced lovely music for the Synod and will undoubtedly do so for the Requiem. As is the custom, all members of the Society who have died since the previous requiem (in this case the one here at the Resurrection in November 2015) will be the special recipients of the fruits of the Mass, but also all departed members of the Guild. I hope very much to see as many of you as can think realistically about making this pilgrimage of prayer to Boston to that wonderful church, and even if you cannot come, as you continue your work of intercession for the dead, consider whether you could not, in addition to the daily prayers for those in our current chantry, also join the larger number of people who pray for the WHOLE list of the dead which is the lists in these Intercession Papers plus the list of all the past dead which is in the Chantry Book available from us. We need more people to pray for the whole of our dead, in addition to the members of the Council, the Chantry Priests who have undertaken to do this, and what Father Kunkel first called the "beadsmen", the laymen who undertook to do this larger work in the Guild. Let me or Father Lancaster know if you would be interest in undertaking this larger work. It would be perfect for the retired, those who work at home or those who are able to attend daily mass, and do that as a preparation or thanksgiving for the Mass.

The Council will also have its Annual Meeting on the evening of Friday, 11th November. At this meeting any matters pending will be taken up, reports will be made on the various branches and on financial affairs, and there will be the customary elections. Four members of the Council have terms ending every year (of the total twelve), and the officers are then elected or re-elected as the case may be.

It recently came to my attention that a priest friend of mine of long-standing (nearly 30 years) had specified I was to celebrate his Requiem Mass and preach at it. This may perhaps have been a nod to the fact that I am Superior-General of the Guild and have been now for about twenty years, it may also be a recognition of our long relationship as colleagues and friends, or as one always hopes to think, a reflection simply that the person thinks we would make a good job of it! I was flattered and humbled, though I hope I don't have to exercise this function for many years!

It did make me reflect on the content of so many funeral sermons, "orations" or "panegyrics" they used to be called in the more orotund style of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. We are all familiar with the word oration and it simply means any kind of speech, though speeches are rarely given these days. What has been termed "concession speeches" or "victory speeches" by the political candidates especially during this cycle have been generally off-the-cuff rants about various matters and often composed of nothing near what we would call elevated speech or even polished written English, some even having more savour of the gutter about them than anything else. Indeed, there are few areas of American life where such formal speeches are given – they are no longer current in Congress, having become much more informal, and the President's so-called speeches are really no longer anything of the kind, they are one-sided conversations with the American people. The sole survival perhaps is in the decisions of the Supreme Court, but with Justice Scalia's passing (regardless of our politics) we have surely seen the diminution of the literary character of these decisions and certainly of their wit. It is interesting to note that President Roosevelt made a careful distinction between his speeches, quite formal and intricately crafted, which were made on public occasions, and the talks that he gave for political purposes which were much more spirited, and finally the "fireside chats" given on the radio in which he aimed simply to converse (albeit one-way) with the American public. No such distinction would be made, or understood, to-day.

This is the foundation of our difficulty about preaching in general and the funeral sermon in particular. It then moves beyond this to cultural differences and a profound paradigm shift. In Protestant circles in this country, and what were once termed Nonconformist circles in England, until the 1960s or so, funerals were very serious matters, were conducted with considerable pomp and great seriousness, and were characterised by mourning for the dead and a recognition of his accomplishments and qualities. "Eulogies" were given, which extolled these virtues. In the Catholic Tradition, both the Latin Rite and in the Catholic Tradition in Anglicanism, eulogies were not permitted. It was thought, rightly in my view, that the point of these occasions was not the dead person himself or even his accomplishments or wonderful qualities. Indeed, even the word "panegyric" leads us to a different idea. In Athens such speeches were delivered at national festivals or games, with the object of rousing the citizens to emulate the glorious deeds of their ancestors. The most famous are the *Olympiacus* of Gorgias, the *Olympiacus* of Lysias, and the *Panegyricus* and *Panathenaicus* of Isocrates. Funeral orations, such as the famous speech of Pericles in Thucydides, also shared the nature of

panegyrics but did not well on the deceased himself. Such is also our problem. Otherwise, what would we say when someone died, who was entirely a faithful Christian who had achieved little or nothing by this world's reckoning, or who was personally very difficult? The point, instead, we have insisted was quite different, and indeed supposed to be different. The point was that what we had to say was that as Christians, those baptised into the Body of Christ, the deceased were now, we prayed, embarked on a spiritual journey to God, the next part of that spiritual journey in fact which began in the womb before their birth, in what we call Purgatory, the church expectant. That church expectant waits not for the Coming Again of Our Lord to judge the quick and the dead and the world by fire, for all creation groans in travail waiting for that, as St Paul says in the eighth chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, but is instead waiting for its own purification and readiness to be with God. The souls of those in purgatory are being made ready for God because few, if any, of us will be found entirely ready to be with God at the hour of our death. It is the church's teaching therefore, that this period of Purgatory, which is of course not strictly a time as there no longer is time then, nor a place in the conventional sense, has as its purpose readying souls for Heaven, just as was our purpose here on Earth. The difference is that in Purgatory, God readies us, whereas on Earth it was our calling to ready ourselves, however faithful we were to that calling, (or not!). The doctrine of Purgatory, so often derided, and foolishly denounced by Martin Luther and John Calvin among others is in fact a gracious one, the sign that God has not given up on us even after death, and there is still the opportunity for a new beginning. As we know from the parable of the ninety-and-nine sheep, God will leave behind the flock to save one sheep of his own making, and Purgatory is the proof of that. We must remember that it is poets and artists who have constructed our mental picture of Purgatory as a kind of mini-hell with the same monarch, the same activities and the same personnel as the real Hell. Nothing could be further from the truth, and no warrant for this view can be found in Scripture or Tradition. Anyone who finds himself in Purgatory gives thanks at once for he perceives that God's plan for him includes preparation for eventual salvation and endless life with Christ and Our Lady in Heaven. As a child once said in my catechism class at St Mary's in Times Square about 1987, "So if you get to Purgatory, you're home free." There isn't any simpler or more cogent way of putting that!

Our difficulty in preaching at Requiems now, or at the "celebrations of life" which seem to be so frequent, is that what people expect is a catalogue of virtues of the deceased, problematic because, let us face the truth, not everyone will have the same kind of catalogue of virtues upon death. These speeches, often even made by well-meaning relations or colleagues, will also rely on droll stories which are often of a dubious nature, and sometimes even off-colour. The serious difficulty here is that all this inspires one reaction only – that of tearfully remembering that the deceased was dear to you and is now dead and will no longer be in your life doing these wonderful things. That is, in itself, a sad message and in no way uplifting. There is no wonder that the modern "celebratory" funeral is so flat and ineffective, as what it

really does is bring everyone down by remembering someone's presence which will now, obviously, never again be experienced in this world.

The traditional sermon at a Requiem does something entirely different, for it is aimed at something different. The particular virtues and lifetime of the person in question are never really mentioned unless they were of a purely religious nature and in themselves have some teaching value. The doctrine taught is the one that we all share by virtue of baptism, that we are members of the Body of Christ, and have a promised share in endless life in Christ and the gracious and loving truth of this is that it doesn't depend on one's achievements, how much one is loved or revered by survivors, or the "impact" one has made on people's lives – the major qualification is Holy Baptism, and to one's credit are all the Sacraments received with proper intent, and the good works of one's life understood in their context which only God can do. As a result, our message is in fact a different one entirely, it is the supreme message of Hope. Adding to that, the Guild has another wonderful truth to add: God has revealed that there is something concrete and practical that we, the Church Militant, that is the church still living in the world, can do, and that is pray for the dead. As the Book of Maccabees says, "It is a holy and salutary thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sins", and that same passage also talks about alms being given in token of this prayer, which is precisely what we do at All Souls' Day when you make such donations to your parish church and, we hope, to the Guild itself. So the so-called "black requiem" in fact is the pre-eminent service of hope and trust. The black vestments and the solemn details like unbleached candles, the absence of the Alleluia, singing restrained hymns and the restrained use of music in general, all betoken not the lack of hope, but the solemn fact that death is serious, it is important, and though it is something we all fear and in a sense dread, the grave is the bed of Hope and the gate of death leads not to annihilation but to new and unending life in Christ. We cannot pretend that we are thrilled that our friends and family are dead, such would be ridiculous theologically and psychologically and the absurdity of it is beginning to fray through experience, but what we can do is reflect on the fact that in the midst of sadness, tears, solemnity and grief, is always the shining beacon of Christ's life and his Redemption of the world. The Priest of Love made Himself the Victim of His Own Sacrifice on Mount Calvary and as a result of that, we have the hope that we too will share in his own Victory, the Victory of the Empty Tomb. Writing this as I am, in a sense, by the light of the Paschal Candle which is burning these last few days before Ascension Day, we are reminded powerfully of this truth

Yours in the Holy Souls,

(The Rev'd Canon) Barry E. B. Swain, SSC,

Superior-General