

GAS Letter July 2012

Dear Fellow Members of the Guild:

A priest friend of mine related the story recently to me of a priest's funeral, a classmate of his from Seminary, who had died unexpectedly and quite young. The funeral took place in the church he had served as an assistant, and naturally, everyone came. All well and good. The shock came as the proceedings wore on. The service was relentlessly presented as an Easter Mass, almost as if it were Easter Day itself. No suggestion was allowed that something sad had taken place, that people were grieving or needed space and time to mourn corporately. It was the triumph of a good idea (that we do not mourn as others who have no hope, and that the Easter victory of Christ was a victory over death), but at the expense of good sense (the knowledge that a major part of any funeral is the legitimate expression of corporate grief within the perfect act of worship, the Mass). In a sense, it was the triumph of a dogmatic liturgical principle over pastoral needs. The next terrible error was a sermon which dwelt exclusively on the priest's achievements in life and certain episodes in it. Not only is dwelling on the deceased unsuitable and un-Christian, it also suggests to those present that the most important part of his or her story is over, when in fact we know that the most important part of the story is just beginning!

Every priest and musician knows, or ought to know, that funerals need to walk a tightrope between conflicting pits which yawn beneath them. One pit to fall in is the one of mawkish grief almost as if we had no hope, which tended to be the Victorian weakness. After the cool, appraising eye of the Age of Reason in the 18th century with its measured approach to death, two things conspired to change the climate, both religiously and socially. One was the Great Awakening of Faith, among Methodists and Evangelicals, and the contemporaneous recovery of Catholic Tradition amongst Tractarians and later Ritualists. The other was the success of the Romantic movement of the early 19th century, in literature, poetry, painting, architecture, and so on, which replaced entirely the neo-Classical taste of the 18th century. The former led to a renewed emphasis on God in connection with the dead, and the latter connected people both with earlier (mediaeval and Gothic) traditions relating to the dead, and the triumph of personal feeling and sentiment. This produced a potent cocktail just waiting for the right barman to mix it up, and that barman, if you'll pardon the expression, was Queen Victoria. When the Prince Consort died in 1861, unexpectedly and after a short illness, at a relatively young age (even for that time), the Queen was distraught. Her forty year orgy of personal grief lasted until her own death in 1901. It affected every corner of British society, and therefore of the whole British Empire, but it also affected powerfully both European death customs and those in the United States. Prolonged mourning, extravagant and sentimentally powerful funerals, and a plethora of "death customs" which included mourning bands for almost everyone connected to the deceased, mourning stationery, and even carriage horses being put into mourning, enveloped all of society. The "mourning industry" as it might now be called, became one of the greatest areas of business growth of the industrial revolution. Looking back on all this now, it seems incredible, and yet it happened. The influence of these customs and morés was enormous and remained well into the post-war period of this century. Even as a little boy, I was given a black mourning band to wear on my suit jacket after my grandparents died. That was in the 1960s, and it was old-fashioned then. It seems most unlikely that it would happen today, as often surviving spouses don't even wear black to funerals, much less for any period afterwards. As these customs were jettisoned, they were widely decried, and thought to be excessive and even ridiculous. No doubt, there was such a side to them, and there is no question that they became carried away.

The resultant reaction, growing now since the early 1960s, is the new tyranny. "No flowers, no sadness, no mourning" is often contained in funeral directions, and people in their 60s and 70s planning funerals are very often heirs of this reaction, and are very much against black vestments and the traditional Requiem Mass, even if they are otherwise quite traditional. As with most over-reactions, there is, at the

bottom of this (as with the other point of view) a real truth. This is that we are indeed an Easter people, and we do not mourn as those who have no hope. We know that death is not the end of God's mercies, and that he continues to work with souls after their earthly death, preparing them for Heaven. When we are dealing with people who have had long, happy lives and have died naturally (especially if expected), then this doctrine holds no difficulties. It is easily possible for us to dwell on these positive aspects and to place our relations, friends and colleagues in the palm of God's hand. The difficulties come if the death comes to one before time, by accident or violence, unexpectedly, or if it leaves behind those who now are in great difficulty (a surviving spouse, dependent children, etc). Here we are often forced to realise that this theological truth is but one side of the coin, and that pastorally it often makes no sense to stress it to the ignoring of the other side of the coin. Death is sad, we shall miss those whom we love but see no longer, and it is often a time of great grief, of which we must try to make some sense. The truth of the matter is that this process is not aided by pretending that we are not sad, or indeed that we are jubilant, and are in fact engaged in some kind of facsimile of an Easter Day mass. The more this doctrine and the liturgical observance of it is pushed and emphasised, the more often it seems that it makes no sense. I myself have seen the spectacle of a grief-stricken congregation mourning the death of a whole family, including young children who had been in our school, in an airplane accident, who were being coerced into singing Easter hymns, Alleluias, and who, in the sermon, were offered nothing more than funny stories and anecdotes about the family's life together or the father's business activities. The disconnect between the congregation's feelings, sympathies and prayers and that of the service could not have been more obvious.

We need some kind of balance here. We must understand that we need to present the Christian hope to those who mourn, the fact that the empty tomb means that Christ has vanquished sin and death and they have no more dominion over him, and therefore, over us. All that is very true. But it is also true that we need to make space for people to grieve and mourn, and that funeral liturgies of whatever kind must bear the freight of the solemnity of death and burial. It is not a time for jokes, funny stories and anecdotes, or dwelling simply on the person's past life. Catholic liturgy should open a window to eternity, should illuminate the sadness, grief and mourning, not deny them, and while shining the light of Easter morning, should never forget that Our Lord's death on the Cross, with Our Lady's desperate mourning, had to come first.

Please remember that just as you have obligations to pray the Guild's prayers for our beloved dead, so you have privileges. You may always ask us for our prayers for your sick, dying, and departed. These can be one time prayers, or you may enroll someone in our posthumous chantry prayers in perpetuity. If you wish to enroll someone posthumously in the Guild, ensuring prayers indefinitely, please send the name and your offering to Father Lancaster. If you wish one time prayers for the sick, the dying or the dead, simply drop a postcard or indeed an e-mail to me (rector@resurrectionnyc.org) and the prayers will be offered at the Guild's National Shrine at the Church of the Resurrection in New York. The full chantry list is remembered here daily, as well as the current list which you yourselves receive. Chantry books are still available for anyone who wishes to take on this extra spiritual work of mercy, in addition to the current list sent to you twice a year.

Please note the date of our Annual Requiem, Saturday, 10 November, at 11.00 a.m. at All Saints' Church, 209 Ashmont Avenue, in the Dorchester section of Boston, at the kind invitation of Father Michael Godderz, SSC, its Rector. All Saints is a very beautiful church, with a long Catholic tradition, and a very fine musical tradition with a men and boys choir. If you are within striking distance of Boston, we hope very much that you will consider coming and joining in the Requiem Mass, the Church's perfect prayer for her children, moving on in their pilgrimage of grace towards God.

Yours in the Holy Souls,

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

Superior-General