

Annual Requiem of the Guild of All Souls



In the Name of the One, Living, and True God: + Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

The very first All Souls' Day after my priesting, I prepared what I thought at the time was a finely well-crafted sermon on death and the Paschal mystery, cribbing the text off a chapter in the doctoral dissertation I was writing at the time on the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. As is often the fate of such precocious enterprises, my *pièce de résistance* fell rather flat. I will never forget the reaction of one of the dowagers in the congregation that morning, a grand old dame of Rome's "black aristocracy," a real-life *principessa*: "*Carissimo Don Giampiero, sarebbe stato preferibile se tu non avessi portato in su tali pensieri spiacevoli...Dearest, it would have been preferable if you had not brought up such unpleasant thoughts.*"

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While I am more than ready to admit that my early homiletical effort may have erred in excess both of zeal and pedantry, I refuse to concede that, for Christians, death should somehow be viewed as an “unpleasant” subject, something unmentionable, to be spoken of in hushed tones. Death is something which our faith has a lot to say, even more so in a culture where death is so often swept under the rug, the last taboo, as it were, in an age where it seems convention has otherwise ceased to have meaning. While the future of each of us as individuals is uncertain, it is a sure thing that we shall all die.

That doesn't mean that some of our contemporaries won't go to quite extraordinary lengths to deny this truth. Earlier this year, a group of researchers published a study with the ponderous title that only a peer-reviewed academic journal editor could love: “Anti-Aging Market (Baby Boomer, Generation X and Generation Y), by product (Botox, Anti-Wrinkle Products, Anti-Stretch Mark Products, and Others), by Services (Anti-Pigmentation Therapy, Anti-Adult Acne Therapy, Breast Augmentation, Liposuction, Chemical Peel, Hair Restoration Treatment, and Others), by Device (Microdermabrasion, Laser Aesthetics, Anti-Cellulite Treatment and Anti-Aging Radio Frequency Devices): Global Industry Perspective, Comprehensive Analysis, Size, Share, Growth, Segment, Trends and Forecast, 2015-2021.” With no less than 55 tables and 49 figures spread over 110 pages, the authors meticulously document a market for anti-aging remedies worth \$140.3 billion in 2015 and calculate that demand is increasing by a compounded annual growth rate of 7.5 percent, so that by 2021 it will be worth more than \$216.5 billion—a sum that is more than the current combined gross domestic product of the fifty least developed countries in the world. From botox injections to spending

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hours each day in hyperbaric oxygen tanks to the British firm that last month announced what it claims to be a technological breakthrough that will permit it to freeze the heads of patients for up to 250 years at half of the cheapest price currently available for the service (a £10,000 “bargain” offered through a Russian company)—are there any lengths at which point our contemporaries would demur?

In our “Brave New World” where scientific breakthroughs can feed the conceit that there is no limit to mankind’s dominion over the natural order, death alone, it seems stands in the way of the fulfillment of our grandest ambitions. So anything to deny that enemy.

If science does not provide the answer, to where then do we look? From the outset of human civilization, philosophy has tried to grapple with this same tormenting question. We have, for example, the Plato’s famous dialogue, *Phaedo*, which is dedicated to the proof of the immortality of the soul. While it is probably one of the most profound meditations ever written on the subject, its premise (“*the whole life of a wise man is just one eternal dying*”) is also deeply unsatisfying insofar as its affirmation of another world has the effect of undermining the reality and value of this one, Plato’s argument being that this world contains only suffering, mindlessness, and change means that there must be another world where there is happiness, eternal life, and changelessness. It is, of course, a perennial temptation: things are awful here, therefore let us look forward to what awaits on the other side.

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Ultimately, however, this type of mindset triggered a backlash. As the great *émigré* Russian Orthodox theologian Father Alexander Schmemmann, who served as Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, first in New York City and later in Crestwood, Yonkers, once acknowledged in an address broadcasted into the Soviet Union by Radio Liberty:

It is precisely on account of such a view that man abandoned religion. For, can it really be that God created the world and life and all of its beauty, all of its possibilities, only in order that man would reject them and forego all these glorious possibilities in the name of some unknown and only vaguely promised world? And the reasoning goes, "Well, since all religions are calling us to such an understanding—let's throw out religion altogether, we can survive well enough without it, we can live a far better life here on earth."

And so, we have the Bolshevik Revolution, whose centenary we marked just this week. On the October Revolution and its aftermath, one of the most succinct summaries was recently penned by an English essayist:

The chief demerit of the Marxist program was its point-by-point defiance of human nature. Bolshevik leaders subliminally grasped the contradiction almost at once; and their rankly Procrustean answer was to leave the program untouched and change human nature...

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[For this reason Lenin declared:] “Precisely at this moment we must give battle to [the clergy] in the most decisive and merciless manner and crush its resistance with such brutality that it will not forget it for decades to come...” Church records show that 1,962 monks, 2,691 priests and 3,447 nuns were killed that year alone. Religion, you see, was part of human nature, so the Bolsheviks were obliged to suppress it in all its forms.

All religions are not, of course, equal. From its dawn, Christianity has objected to both the rejection of life in the name of death and the rejection of eternity in favor of this transitory life. Thus St. Paul writes: “*The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death*” (1 Corinthians 15:26). And, as we heard in the Epistle of this mass:

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed; In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

Thus, we go back to the very heart of our faith as Christians. Jesus truly died, and yet was raised to life by God. And all who have faith in him, although we, too, will die, will be raised to life by God. The apostle goes on to proclaim that:

Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is

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the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (15:54-57)

So, we find ourselves in a different place than Plato because Christ never spoke about the immortality of the soul, its separation from the body; instead he preached the resurrection of the dead. As that most ancient Christian confession of faith, the Apostle's Creed, straightforwardly affirms: "*I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.*"

But if death is not the end, if resurrection is the core of the apostolic preaching, how do we relate to those who have died? What is it that we do here today, especially when, as we just did few minutes ago, we remembered by name before God those departed members of the Guild of All Souls and those others for whom we pray?

This, of course, can be a fraught question. Notwithstanding what the Church has taught from the beginning—*lex orandi, lex credendi*, the rule of prayer establishing the rule of belief—as witnessed by the most ancient liturgical texts as well as the *graffiti* scratched on the walls of various *cubiculi* in the Roman catacombs over the tombs of the martyrs, the abuse of the doctrine of the Church Expectant, led the Reformers—and one has to give a nod to them in this quincentenary of Martin Luther's posting on the doors of the Wittenberg *Schlosskirche*—to throw out the fullness of Catholic teaching along with rightly reprobated excesses *à la* Friar Johann Tetzel. Thus, the twenty-second of the Article of Religion: "*Romish doctrine*

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concerning Purgatory... is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture; but rather repugnant to the word of God."

Thus, for a time, prayers for the dead and the commemoration of the faithful departed largely disappeared from the official Prayer Books of the Church of England and her daughters, but never entirely from the consciousness of the faithful. The latter because the Articles—or any other “official statements” of the sort that seem to fill binders these days at diocesan synods and general conventions—cannot suppress the *sensus fidelium* of those baptized into Christ’s one holy catholic Church, any more than political correctness can change the human nature of the citizens of our commonwealth.

In any event, returning to prayer for the dead, which is so much part of the character of the Christian as to be almost part of the very nature of the life of the believer, thanks in large measure to the efforts of the founders of this Guild and others—one thinks, for example, of the Reverend Dr. Alfred Mortimer, sixth rector of St. Mark’s, Philadelphia, and the famous sermon he preached at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in this city on the eve of All Soul’s Day 1894—the birthright of all Catholic Christians has been restored to a more prominent place in our part of the universal Church, even if not entirely to its rightful place and, for sure, not everywhere (thus the Guild’s continual prayer for an increase of members such as to best enable us to do the work set before us).

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die:

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and their departure is taken for misery, And their going from us to be utter destruction: but they are in peace. For though they be punished in the sight of men, yet is their hope full of immortality. (Wisdom 3:1-4)

This is the hope that runs throughout Sacred Scripture. That immortality is indeed a reassurance, not that we can *communicate* with the faithful departed—that is perhaps the trade of several second-floor or basement-level establishments found along less fashionable sections of Lexington Avenue—but that we are in *communion* with them.

Last week, the Church celebrated the feast of All Saints. It is a festival that not only commemorates those formally named—most without a universal observance—in the Church’s calendars (here one finds extraordinary diversity of people, men and women of every conceivable condition and estate, a fact that ought to be of tremendous encouragement for all us, “*we who feebly struggle whilst they in glory shine*”), but also “*all other...righteous servants, known to us and unknown.*” And if the saints speak to us from the past, they are also signposts for the life of the Church now and into the future. This is because the Church is not simply an organization among others, but, in the words of the Prayer Book collect of the feast, the elect “*knit together...in one communion and fellowship.*”

In contrast the somber liturgy of All Souls’ Day—and of today’s requiem—while it continuous theologically with the triumphant liturgy of All Saints Day, presents us with a dramatic shift. We give space for human grief as we recall the people we

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have loved who have died to this life. Unlike the saints who are remembered by name, even if only as a secondary or even tertiary reference in the martyrologies, the people we hold before God may only be remembered by us. In fact, it has been considered an act of charity by the Church since time immemorial to also hold up in prayer also those unnamed who have no one else to pray for them or to think of them. And of course, it is not only we who are in communion with them, but they with us, as St. Augustine once exclaimed of his beloved mother St. Monica: *“God forbid that in a higher state of existence she should cease to love, or that she should not, if she could, have come to console me when I suffer—she who loved me more than words can say!”*

These words of the Doctor of Grace capture what is truly meant by the Church’s prayer for the dead. It is about the work of intercession in the sense which Archbishop Michael Ramsey described as true prayer: not the making of petitions or even speaking words, but to “be with God with his people on our hearts”—all his people, the whole *“company of all faithful people,”* those already enjoying the everlasting kingdom, those still struggling here on earth, and, of course, those who have departed this life and now await in expectation the fulfillment of their hopes.

At its very core, what the Paschal Mystery tells us that our Lord and Savior is not only the God of light, he is also sovereign over the darkness because he too was enfolded by darkness. Like us, he grieved over the senseless waste and tragedies encountered in the course of life in this vale of tears. Like us, he agonized over those who suffer. And, as all of us will eventually, he entered into the darkness of death—and not only that, he *“descended into hell,”* as we are reminded by the

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Apostles' Creed. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Williams, has noted, "The emptiness of Holy Saturday is precisely the fullness, the already actual fullness of God: God can only be in humanity's hell, because of what God already and eternally is...If God can be revealed in the cross, if God can be actively God in hell, God is God in or even *as* what is other than God (a dead man, a lost soul)."

The Lord who was crucified, who descended into the depths of the abode of the dead, and who rose again is the same Lord who promises to redeem the world, to relieve its suffering, to restore its wholeness, and to inaugurate a new creation. The risen Lord is sign of life that God promises to all of us as well as the Life itself: life redeemed, life restored, life transformed, life abundant, eternal and blessed.

It is our faith as Christians that, in the risen Christ, the God in him appears at his most divine, and the man in him at his most human yet both inseparably one—*perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*, in the language of the Athanasian Creed, which the historical prayer books of the Church of England appointed for public recitation some nineteen times during the course of the year. That same Lord, on the eve of the great day of resurrection, by breaking bread with his disciples at Emmaus and disappearing at the same moment, pointed their awakening faith to the presence he established in the Eucharist which was to be his authoritative, abiding presence with them until the end of time. And, that we might already share in that life and be made "*one body with him, that he may dwell in us and we in him,*" the Lord invites us now to share in the spiritual food, the great sacrament, of his most blessed Body and precious Blood, not merely as guests, but as co-heirs who have shared in the fruits of his *kenosis*, his death and his descent into the realm of the

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dead, and thus have the assurance that we too—together with those for whom we pray today—will, through the mercy of God, not only rest in peace, but rise in glory on that day when, in the words of the ancient sequence of the requiem liturgy which we have just heard in the magnificent setting composed by Johann Michael Haydn for the death of Sigismund, Count von Schrattenburg, penultimate Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg: *“Tuba mirum sparget sonum / Per sepulchral regionum / Coget omnes ante thronum... Wondrous sound the trumpet flingeth / Through earth’s sepulchres it ringeth / All before the throne it bringeth.”* Amen.

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