

Dear Fellow Members of the Guild:

I begin the January letter very often by thanking the host for our annual Requiem Mass, but as it would involve thanking myself this year, I think I can dispense with that.! The Requiem was at the Church of the Resurrection in New York on 8 November 2008, and we were given a very fine sermon by Father Fraser, reprinted elsewhere in this number of the Intercession Paper. A treat for the spirit was Michael Haydn's *Requiem in C*, which was written on the death of his patron Archbishop Siegmund. The Choir of Resurrection under the direction of David Enlow offered this with a small orchestra. As with the SSC Synod in September, many people told me how wonderful it was that our music department was able to offer such a special treat. The truth of the matter, as I always say, is that other than the orchestra part, this is precisely the kind of music which are blessed to have Sunday after Sunday at Resurrection, and we were most grateful to the David Enlow and the Choir of the Resurrection for again enriching our offering.

Eight members of the Council were able to be with us for the Mass and the Council Meeting the night before, which met at The Lotos Club. Two new members of the Council were elected, Father Frederick S. Thomas, Rector of Grace & St Peter's Church, Baltimore, Maryland, a long-time supporter of the Guild and a past host of our meetings, and Father Robert A. Kerr, Chaplain of Canterbury on the Lake, Waterford, Michigan. One resignation has been received since the Council Meeting and the vacancy will be dealt with next November.

Next year's Annual Requiem Mass will take place on Saturday, 14 November 2009 at 11.00 a.m.. We shall be the guests of St Paul's Church, K Street, Washington, D. C. Father Andrew Sloane, long-time member of the Council, has very graciously invited us again to be at St Paul's. We were there the last time in 2005, and the welcome given by the clergy and people there, together with the very high standard of the liturgical arrangements always provide for a memorable day. I hope you will mark your 2009 diaries for this as soon as you get them! Note that we are meeting approximately a week later than usual, to avoid being too close to the actual celebrations of All Saints and All Souls Day which, for the clergy at least, causes a dizzyingly busy time if they must also leave town for the Guild's affairs in Washington.

As I write this in very early December, we are embarking on the season of Advent. Although you will be reading it in Christmastide in January, I hope I may be excused a few words about the “four last things”, which used to form sermon material in the Advent season. Just a few days ago, and very close to us here in New York, a part-time security guard in a well-known discount store was trampled to death by early morning shoppers on the day after the National Thanksgiving Day. They became violent in their obsession to get hold of a small number of electronics and other items which were much discounted. If we were talking about a bread line or a soup kitchen, with limited supplies, and people who needed to feed their starving families, we could well understand this kind of panic. People will do anything to eat, and will do anything to protect and feed their families, this is human nature. A heinous occurrence of this nature, though, in the pursuit of consumer goods, even those which in this economic climate could not otherwise be afforded, is a shocking comment on the materialism of our society and also on the complete collapse of any Christian understanding of the feast of Christmas itself and what it means. This collapse has been coming for many years and is perhaps an inevitable concomitant of our increasingly secular society, but the frenzy of the winter commercial and party season in the four weeks or so before Christmas, has now become a more pointed contrast than ever before to the kind of behaviour the Church expects of its communicants. I think I am correct in saying that December every year is the time when the highest possible relief is given to the contrast between what Catholic Christians are expected to do by Our Lord and His Church and what ordinary people in ordinary American and Western European society are expected to do. There is a very stark choice here, and it is one which increasingly speaks of our values and of what we believe is important. The popular expectation, which we encounter in schools (even increasingly in church schools), at our places of employment, among friends, and in clubs and groups we belong to, is that there will be a prolonged and hearty “holiday” celebration throughout December, not explicitly Christian, and not explicitly connected in any way with Christmas. This normally involves plenty of drinking, over-eating, and in many cases, almost nightly functions to attend. Last year, we had an outside group give a concert in the church in early December, and probably thirty people asked me, “Why isn’t your church decorated for Christmas?”

The Church, on the other hand, has always had a different idea about December. It is quite plain both from the traditional and the modern propers of Advent, both in the Anglican use and in the Western Church, that the pre-occupation of Advent is not so much preparing for Christmas (and certainly not celebrating it in advance), but contemplation of the things of the “end”, what is called theologically “eschatology”. This is both the final things of one’s life, and the final things of the life of the world, which are mentioned in the Creeds and in much of the Church’s liturgy (“to judge the quick and the dead, and the world by fire”). We have traditionally thought of them as four last things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell. Three of these four will happen to all men living – it is simply a question of which of the last two. It will be seen immediately by all of us that these concerns are at the very heart of the work and witness of The Guild of All Souls. Death is a matter which people to-day prefer to avoid. Even Christians are spoken of as “having passed away”, and doctors and hospitals universally speak of patients as having “expired” or “terminated”. The entire enormous funeral business is devoted to obscuring all the facts of death, and most modern funeral customs have arisen in that connection – the coffin not being lowered in people’s sight, flowers being strewn on the coffin instead of dirt thrown down, the ground and the grave itself being covered by green carpeting, and so on. Funerals have become “celebrations of life”, and the most common feature of them now is the ubiquitous eulogy which consists largely of jokes and funny anecdotes. A very interesting comment I read recently in the *New York Times* about the television series of programmes called CSI:Miami and CSI:New York (about the forensic solving of murders) is that the reviewer wondered if one of the things that makes them popular is that they reminded people that people actually die and how!

Judgment is no more popular. Very frequently even the clergy and churches conspire in obscuring the fact that any judgment will ever happen. Sin is rarely preached about, and the Sacrament of Penance, in the Roman Church and even more in our own, is at an all time low in modern times. People in the pews can easily be forgiven for thinking that everything they do and everything about them is just fine, because that is often the impression they are given. One of the mothers in our school, a kind and helpful person, remarked that “people don’t want to come to church to feel judged or unworthy”. I have no doubt that she is probably right in saying this of most people, but is that a valid or correct expression of the Gospel message? Is it not more correct to say that

while God certainly so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to save us, it is also fundamentally true that we have all sinned and fallen short of what God expects and wants, and we have sullied the image of God in which we were created. There is nothing sad or wrong in saying this, especially inasmuch as Our Lord, through His Church, has provided means to fix it. The hope of Heaven and the dread of Hell are largely lost sight of in the worship of Earth and our own society. At the recent re-dedication service of the Cathedral Church of St John the Divine, the Dean asserted that the only way to encounter God is the fight for peace and social justice. While that certainly is *one way* to encounter God, it is far from the only one (certainly the Bible and the Seven Sacraments also qualify). Even beyond this is the fundamental truth that while we must work and pray for the best possible society and one that is most attuned to the will of God and the example of Christ, we shall never really and finally create it in this life, and can only hope to find it in the next in Heaven. In mediaeval times, one might legitimately maintain that the pre-occupation with Heaven and the next world allowed Christians to ignore the very real needs of this world. In our own day, might we legitimately say that the pre-occupation with peace, social justice and the needs of our own world sometimes obscure the need to prepare one's own soul for Death, Judgment, the hope of Heaven and the dread of Hell?

In any case, a society in which we are content to trample to death a child of God in the frenzied pursuit of material items for a perverse and completely secularised celebration of "the holidays" is nowhere near the proper preparation of Christians to celebrate the feast of Our Lord's Nativity, and has a great deal to say about what we value in our lives. It is very clear that our society needs to stop and think about its values, and it is just as clear that we, each of us, need to think, watch and pray always, on what we are about in life and where we are going. This deeply involves the vocation of The Guild in witnessing to the four last things, to the Communion of Saints and the life of the world to come.

Yours in the Holy Souls,

The Rev'd Canon Barry E. B. Swain, S.S.C.
Superior-General