

Dear Fellow Members of the Guild of All Souls:

I wonder how many of you have seen the television programme, *Six Feet Under*? This programme, which appears Home Box Office cable, is an extraordinary look into the question of death in our culture. It centres round a family who have been operating a family-style funeral home in Los Angeles for many years. The father was killed in a freak accident himself, and his two sons, one who had been in the business with him and one who had not, take over the operation of the home, assisted by their mother who keeps house for their much younger sister. The two sons are in fact much like the two sons in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, for one has stayed at home dutifully and is now resentful, and the other has been very much a prodigal.

The aspect which is interesting for our purposes is that each episode begins with the death of a person. It is sometimes violent, sometimes accidental, sometimes even grimly humorous. The next hour explores the effect this death has on all those concerned, including the staff of the funeral home. In addition to being very well written, we are shown the full panoply of reactions of people in popular American culture to death itself. Some flee from its reality and want no part in the funeral. Some try to pretend that the person is somehow not really dead and ensure that the corpse is as lifelike as possible. Some feel angry and resentful that their loved one has died; others rejoice openly. It is an astonishing and vivid picture. The Clergy are familiar with much of this, and we often find very strange attitudes indeed on the part of those who survive. Denial, anger, feelings of loss, confusion about the fate of the deceased Christian, all these join together to form a jigsaw puzzle of conflicting emotions. Often, secular comforts are advanced or sought: "It's better this way; he is out of his pain", "She would have wanted to go", and so on. Even stranger, sometimes seemingly Christian but actually pagan ideas are embraced: of a child's death and even sometimes an adult, it is sometimes suggested that the person is now an angel (*It's a Wonderful Life*). It is often suggested, against scriptural evidence, that the deceased has immediately been admitted to Heaven, or that we can be certain that this is so. Oddest of all is the assertion that Christians are somehow subject to the teachings of other religions, most commonly re-incarnation, which is directly contrary to Our Lord's teaching on the individuality of the person and the inextricable connexion between one body and one soul.

Such strange contradictions are very closely connected to the Christian paradox about death itself. In mediaeval days, this contradiction was between two poles of Christian thought and feeling. The first was that we naturally, even as Christians, fear death. We hope that it will be as long delayed as possible, and pray for a long and happy life. We pray to avoid sickness and catastrophe, accident and loss of faculties. This was even more accentuated in mediaeval times, when infant mortality, death by battle or violence, and above all, the

plague, were constantly feared. This points to a very human truth: although as Christians we know that Death is not final, we still fear it, and mourn the deaths of those we love. This is a fact of life, and not to be ignored or despised. The death of a child, a person in his prime, anyone we love, is an occasion for grief. As Her Majesty the Queen said of the September 11th deaths, Grief is quite simply the price we pay for loving others. The funeral services of the Church recognise this, and accept that even Christians who believe, hope, trust and know the promise of Our Lord's Resurrection to all of us, have fear and grief surrounding the process of life and death. It has ever been thus.

The other side of this coin is that as Christians we do not mourn as those who have no hope. We realise that since we have been baptised into the Death and Resurrection of Christ, we share also in his victory over death. "Death hath no more dominion over him", is our cry, and we understand that this means us too. It is in this sense that St Francis of Assisi was able to call Death his "friend" in the Canticle of the Sun. How many of us really would feel able to do that in all frankness? Yet as Christians that is precisely what we ought to do. The grave is the bed of hope, and the gate of death leads for the Christian to Eternal Life. The Promise of Eastertide, which is of course also the promise of our baptisms, is that death in this life is but the prelude to the next life: being prepared to meet God, and finally sharing in his eternal and heavenly banquet, of which the Mass on Earth is but a pale replica. In this sense we can say that Death is the Great Adventure. Perhaps some of us feel adventurous and say when the time comes, "Bring it on!". Others will shrink timidly from the unknown. Most of us will have known both feelings from time to time. The important point is that the Christian facing death, as we all must, has before him the example of Our Lord's Death and Resurrection and the certain knowledge that it brings, he has the Sacraments of the Church to fortify him: Baptism, Confirmation, the Holy Eucharist, Penance and Extreme Unction. He has also the teaching of the Gospels and the Epistles. He has the prayers of Our Lady and all the Saints to guard and guide him. He has finally the prayers of the Church after he has died, recommending him in love to God, the Loving Father who has made all things.

Affectionately, Yours in the Holy Souls,

Father Barry Swain,
Superior-General

ANNUAL MEETING

Saturday 13th November, Noon

Church of the Resurrection, 119 East 74th Street,
New York, New York 10021

High Mass of Requiem & Sermon, Absolution at the Catafalque

Luncheon to follow at reasonable cost

Please make reservations before 6 November by mail to the above address or by phone to 212 879 4320 to the attention of the Parish Office.