

## SUPERIOR'S LETTER JULY 2011

Dear Fellow Members of the Guild:

In the July number of the Intercession Paper, we look forward to the Annual Requiem Mass rather than backwards to the last. This year, we shall be having the Annual Requiem on Saturday, 12 November at 11.00 a.m. at the Church of the Resurrection, 119 East 74<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, New York, the Guild's National Shrine. Our preacher for the occasion will be Father Robert A. Kerr, SSC, Rector of St John's Church, Westland, Michigan, who has been a member of our Council for a few years. Father Kerr is an excellent preacher and has been a hospice and nursing home chaplain and seminary professor in addition to being a parish priest. David Enlow and the Resurrection Choir will be providing a yet-to-be-determined Requiem Mass setting on that occasion, and of course those who are present will hear the Church's new organ, an heirloom 1916 Casavant entirely restored and with many lovely additions made to it. Luncheon will follow and we hope that you will be able to join us for the day to pray for our dead.

In my own parish church, we have been thinking much of death lately as one of our own, a member of 55 years standing who remained extremely active in the church up until Christmas, died in the early hours of Easter Day. The antiphon to the Magnificat at the end of the Easter Vigil says, "In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalen and the other Mary went to the sepulchre." Of course, they went with spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus, but their task was frustrated. The tomb was empty as he had risen from the dead. In a mysterious and dramatic end to his life, our beloved brother Thomas Rae, also a member of the Guild, died at exactly this time, at the end of the (Jewish) Sabbath as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week. I was there to give him Viaticum, the last reception of Holy Communion in a person's life, he had been anointed in the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, and was prepared for death in every way the Church offers. I was there immediately after the Easter Vigil, and it brought into high relief the fact that the Paschal Mystery and its promise of eternal life in Christ Jesus, the Risen Lord, colours all aspects of the Christian's life, even (or perhaps I should say especially) his death. It could not escape any of us in the parish community or others who knew him, that in the same way that the Good Friday shadows lengthened but resolved in the rising sun of Easter Day illuminating the empty tomb, so the gathering shadows of every Christian's end of life, whether expected or sudden, resolve in the increasing light of their growing nearness to Our Lord.

The process of purification, purgation and growing readiness to be with the Risen Christ for ever in heaven is mysterious, and we have only limited information and revelation about how it happens. What we do know is that having made of our lives the best oblation we can, we may trust in his promise made to Martha at the time of Lazarus' death, "I am the Resurrection and the Life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." This promise is also the heart of the Paschal Mystery and it is manifested not only in all the

Easter Rites and Ceremonies but also in the Sacrament of Baptism and its rites of administration. I always find it impressive and fascinating that Our Lord does not say that he is the object of the Resurrection or simply that he lives, but that he *is* the Resurrection. Everything about him is wrapped up in this mystery, and the mystery itself is completely identified with him. In a way, it reminds me of the interrogation of St Bernadette after she had begun to receive the visitations from Our Lady at Lourdes. When she asked the name of the Lady, she was told, "I am the Immaculate Conception". The Dean of Lourdes thought this ridiculous, a person cannot *be* a doctrine, he thundered. But the Immaculate Conception was completely wrapped up in Our Lady, and contrariwise Our Lady is entirely identified with the doctrine. It is even more so with Our Lord and his Resurrection. There is no dead Christ.

The following part of that interview with Our Lord and Martha is equally important. It is the answer she makes to his declaration. In a sense, it reminds us so much of our own baptisms and the answers we made or were made for us. Once he tells her who he is, that is what is at the heart of his mission and ministry, Resurrection and Life, it brings forth the necessity of a response. She declares, "I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world." With this, she identifies herself clearly and explicitly with him, with his mission and ministry, and with Resurrection and Life. Perhaps it is not too much to say that with this declaration she anticipates the gift of the grace of the approaching Sacrament of Baptism.

Quite dramatically with our recent death, God has reminded us (at least in this parish church), exactly what we are about. We make of our life in this world the most perfect gift, the best oblation, we can make to God. We hope that he will smile on this gift and find us worthy in some small way to dwell with him forever in Heaven. We rely on the promises made to us in our Baptisms, Confirmations, in the regular use of the Sacrament of Penance, in the Anointing of the Sick, and in the grace of the reception of the Blessed Sacrament. Most of us quite expected to find, I suppose, either that the sadness of Thomas Rae's death either clouded our Easter, or that perhaps our Easter joy meant that we felt no sadness at his death. Neither was true of course. Our Easter joy, ushered in at the Vigil, just hours before his death, was complete and total just as in any other year. Christ is Risen. We knew that, we gave thanks for it, and rejoiced in it. The new fire had been kindled, the Paschal Candle lit, the Exsultet sung, the Prophecies illuminated our understanding of the past, the Baptismal Font and water were blessed, the Litany of the Saints honoured and begged the intercession of those who are already at the throne of Grace, and finally we celebrated the first Mass of Easter. No death, not the death of Our Lord's himself on Good Friday, nor indeed the death of any Christian need displace this joy. On the other hand, we know that as human beings we naturally relate to this world, and our place in it. We are sad and mourn that someone we loved will no longer be part of our immediate lives, this is inescapable. For Christians to pretend, or to be asked to pretend by the Church, that this is not so, is absurd and injurious. Any psychologist or psychiatrist will tell you that people need, and are entitled to, their grief. Unlike the unremitting secular grief felt by some, however, ours is suffused by the glow of the Rising Sun of Christ over his Empty Tomb. The intimate connection between these two was summed up for us in a mysterious and poignant way

this year in my church, and for this we have all given thanks. The liturgical manifestation of all this spoke to the situation too: the altar was vested in black as were the sacred ministers, and much about the plainsong Requiem is sad and mournful. There were no Alleluias in the service, and many in the congregation were dressed in mourning and there were tears. On the other hand, the entire church was dressed for Easter, as though even nature could not contain itself with joy at the Resurrection. Hundreds of flowers were everywhere, and of course the Paschal Candle itself stood in, as always, for the Risen Christ. If any scene has helped me understand anew this whole mystery, it was that day. The Gospel, of course, was Our Lord's interview with Martha, just after her brother Lazarus' death. We felt the promise very closely, "Thy brother shall rise again", and like Martha, we were able to answer in Faith, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day". In this encounter is wrapped up the whole meaning of the Paschal Mystery and our place in it.

When a death occurs close to you, remember this promise, pray for our beloved dead, and often for a time with sadness and mourning, but never as those who have no hope. The Guild of All Souls is founded on the hope of the Resurrection and Our Lord's declaration to Martha, "I am the Resurrection and the Life, that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live".

Yours in the Holy Souls,

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