

Thoughts at All Saints, All Souls Days

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November 1, 2020

When I attended my first national Catholic bishops meeting, some asked if I had ordained any priests. I got the impression that this somehow completed my appointment, and my first was months away.

No one advised me to anticipate an equally profound event, presiding at a priest's funeral. I am sure that my colleagues knew this was important. It's just that there is no way to adequately prepare a new bishop for how many tendrils of faith and fraternity get illuminated at the death of one of his priests.

Early deaths of men in their primes are both sad and awe inspiring. Their skills and graces are magnified at their passing. This is how we experienced the 2018 death of Father Tim Kroeger who had retired due to a progressive illness. In remembering Father Christopher Roberts after his accidental death on October 10th, we realize all the more what a good shepherd we have lost. He was a dedicated pastor of souls.

For the priests of our diocese, and for his family, our distress comes with the realization of how many ways he was a part of us individually and collectively. The Body of Christ, the Church, mourns his death while knowing that the promises of Christ are carrying this son and brother to his share in the Resurrection. He is missed.

Scriptural admonitions to treat others with respect and kindness, without constant judgment, are ancient and modern. The goal is removing obstacles to our being saints. Bygone Christians had their internal challenges with verbal offenses against charity. Cutting utterances weaken both one's character and Church unity. See James 1:26, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, his religion is vain." A house divided lessens the credibility of our evangelizing mission, and reduces the Church's ability to defend against external attacks.

We live in an age when acid-like comments are tossed like confetti. They pass as entertainment, often with little regard for any basis in fact. Jabbing and hurting are valued over correction or healing. How many times in an ordinary day do I encounter a personal or media put-down, a ridicule, a dismissal of another person's worth, a critical judgement based on someone's physical appearance? The New Testament's moral cautions primarily address how we treat other members within the Church. If we cannot sustain our own ecclesial laboratory for respectful exchange in print or in person, if we cannot model it among ourselves, how can we expect it in public processes?

There is a reason why we cycle through the Scriptures on a regular basis. We need to be reminded to behave, but even more to trust that goodness brings its own authority. The Letter to the Ephesians, 4:30-32, provides light for our consciences: "Do nothing that will sadden the Holy Spirit....Get rid of all bitterness, all passion and anger, harsh words, slander and malice of every kind. In place of these, be kind to one another." Following such advice may temporarily make us less interesting at parties or around the water cooler. But we will be more effective as neighbors and evangelizers, as citizens and peacemakers.