

On Pilgrimage - October 1949

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Summary: States St. Therese, the Little Flower, is not a “sentimental” saint but one to “dread” once one gets to know her. Responding to critics, itemizes the cost of Peter Maurin’s funeral. Says “We should prepare for death with joy, as for our nuptials.” Notes they heard talks on three great Russians: Dostoevsky, Tolstoi, and Soloviev. (DDLW #474).

The Little Flower said: “I should not be happy in heaven if I was not able to provide little pleasures on earth for those I love. . . I shall spend my heaven doing good upon earth.” I like these quotations. Either the Little Flower is looked upon (perhaps because of her nickname) with sentimentality, or, as one gets to know her better, with dread. On that frail battleground of her flesh was fought the wars of today. When she died her bones were piercing her body and she died in an agony of both flesh and spirit. She was tempted against faith and said that for the last years of her life she forced herself to believe with her indomitable will while a mocking voice cried in her ears that there was neither heaven nor hell, and she was flinging away her life for nothing. To her God was a consuming flame. “It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God,” St. Peter said with exultation. We have to pay a great and terrible price but “underneath are the everlasting arms.” Thank God for the saints whose feast days come around and remind us that we too are called to be saints.

Gratitude

St. Teresa of Avila said once that she was of so grateful a nature that she could be bought with a sardine. And St. Augustine said, “Woe to that person who had not gratitude.” So we always like to thank our friends and benefactors publicly as well as by letter when they help and come to our rescue and cheer us on the way. We are sending out our appeal this month as we usually do in the month of October (a great month for saints) and right now I want to thank them for the help they are going to give as well as for the help they have given us in answer to the appeal which I put in this column last month. Then I mentioned the fact that Peter’s funeral bill had not been paid and four people sent in donations for that specifically, three for ten and one for a hundred dollars. The one who sent

in a hundred dollars said that she was praying to Peter for a particular favor and she wanted to thank him beforehand for his intercession for her.

On Funerals

And here I want to talk about something which it might have been more fitting to talk about in November, the month of the dead. However, I must answer the shocked attitudes of some of our friends when they learned that Peter's funeral had cost so much. They are poor people themselves, and when they wrote, they said that they could not understand how Peter, a poor man, should have had so expensive a funeral, that he would not have wanted it. Indeed, we did not want it either. But we beg our friends to understand if they have not been facing the same circumstances themselves, they will at some time in the future. If we write about this now, maybe our readers will meditate and pray about it during the month of November, and write into their wills directions as to how they wish to be buried, so that their friends and relatives will not be faced with the same situation we were.

The undertakers, morticians, as they euphemistically call themselves, know that people are not in the humor for a fight, for contention, for opposing them when some one dear to them lies dead and waiting for burial. Catholics especially, with their reverence for the body, wish to do it fitting honor to the last. They wish to show that they love the body which served the soul of the departed one. Eventually, as we say in the creed, there will be a resurrection of the body. So when the undertaker comes around, the bereaved are in the helpless position of putting themselves in his hands, and taking his advice.

What we said we wanted was as simple a casket as possible. Whereupon, the only simple casket they had to show us was one for \$190. Without our knowledge or desire, they added to this a fifty dollar white pine box, into which the coffin was placed before it was laid in the grave. A totally unnecessary extra. We knew enough to refuse the customary artificial green grass lining for the grave (which came to twenty dollars extra when my mother was buried five years ago). I suppose the price has been raised since like everything else. The New York representative of the firm of John W. Walsh of Newburgh, which was taking care of the funeral, tried to persuade us to have the grass to cover up the "unsightly earth," the fresh-dug earth, the good earth which Christ made sacred by his humanity! We knew enough to forbid cosmetics, but it was hard to see Peter lying there, in shirt and tie and pressed suit, he who had gone rumpled and untidy and unconscious of his garments during life.

Here is the itemized account of the funeral: Embalming, \$35; casket, \$190; outside box, \$50; personal service (Newburgh), \$25; removal to New York City, \$50; suit, \$12.

For the New York services and "equipment" which consisted of one stand for the coffin when Peter was laid out in the office, \$147. Opening the grave, \$40.

Hearse to the cemetery and three limousines, \$80; the death notice in the paper, \$3. The total is \$632.

Exploiting Grief

When I asked for our own pall bearers, the New York representative tried to terrify us by hinting at disastrous occurrences at the recent funeral of a fireman, when the relatives insisted on having their own pall bearers. Monsignor Ligutti never ceases to protest and cry out against the practice of hiring pall bearers to carry the dear body into the Church, and afterwards out to the grave.

I have protested this bill, but the undertaker makes no effort to lessen the price, stating indignantly that this is the price he charges the priests, Brothers and Sisters in the various Catholic institutions in the neighborhood, and that the extra amount was because Peter had to be taken from Newburgh to New York. He sees no place where the bill can be cut, and refuses to concede that undertakers have one at their mercy when by law it is necessary to call them in.

By law one is forced to be embalmed. That costs \$35 according to Mr. Walsh. But there is no law enforcing the heavy fancy-lined casket, unless the undertakers have forced such a law on the books for their own profit. One can have a decent pine box made and painted black, and as Ade de Bethune says, appropriate symbols painted on the box. We have heard of several people who have had their coffins made already and in readiness for them, as good old Irish women (I have heard) have their shroud ready and put away for the laying out. In Sigrid Undset's novels, the mother of the household before death left direction for the funeral feast and the accommodations of the guests. Death was not a subject to be avoided but to be provided for like a birth. And indeed it is a birth into eternal life and should be so regarded. We are living now in shadow, and the day will come when we will live in eternal brightness with "the desire of the everlasting hills." We should prepare for death with joy, as for our nuptials.

Retreats and Meetings

Romano Guardini said that one's spiritual life must be continually deepened and one's understanding of the faith made fresh and vivid. According to a recent article in the Dublin Review his aim was to show how life in Christ could be achieved by realizing the faith in response to the needs and opportunities of our everyday occupations. The way he did it in the university was by lecturing about great Christians who in their efforts to realize it in themselves and their thought, could serve as models to the rest of us. One of his courses was the problem of religion in Dostoevsky's novels.

The first week in September we had Helene Isvolsky at the farm at Newburgh, giving a course on Dostoevsky, Tolstoi and Soloviev, the three great Russians.

“In a field where poison grows,” she began her course, “you will find its antidote. The same soil produces both.”

She spoke of Soloviev who told of the glories of the Incarnation, and is the link between the east and the west. She spoke of the three great men who emphasized the dignity of the human person.

“To love Russia,” Berdyaev said, “is the way of the cross.”

These three men wrote of the struggle of man towards God and to all of them the golden key which opened the doors of prisons and led out of darkness was the key of love. To listen to such talks is not only to learn more of Christ, but to learn to love the Russians who are truly Christ-bearers in their sufferings and poverty. The ruthlessness of the revolution, Helene Isvolsky said, was due to the degradation of the human person from which they have suffered for centuries.

We hope Miss Isvolsky will give us some more evenings this winter.

Father Meenan’s retreat was so inspiring that we are going to ask him to give us a course of lectures here at the Catholic Worker these coming months.

Another great evening of the month! Father Ricardo Lombardi of Italy spoke (after his Fordham meeting) at the Cathedral to a packed crowd who gathered at seven and sat until ten in spellbound attention. He recounted the response of the people in Italy to the call for social justice and a rebirth of love between men, and he ended his simple discourse with the words, “we must have saints in every country. We must be more good.” He reminded us of Peter Maurin.