

All Souls' Homily, 2013

The poet Sara Coleridge aptly, I think, describes the month of November. "Dull November brings the blast and the leaves are whirling fast." October's bright blue weather is a thing of the past. We won't even speak of the good old summertime.

The leaves are, indeed, just about done. Bare branches poke the sky and the color is reduced to a stark black and white. . The light is fading fast and comes at us with those sharp right angles that make us shade our eyes. It seems as if there is only light and then shadow, or if someone is dimming the lights. The softness and the brightness is gone until late February. It seems fitting that November, with the cold and increasing darkness is a great month to remember the dead.

Gray November and All Souls rather gives us permission to lament, something we modern people don't like to do very much. Lamenting, a real lament, seems almost tacky to us. We're supposed to get a grip on ourselves and put stuff behind us, just carry on as the British like to say, in spite of our knowledge of what post traumatic stress does to people. Some of the old practices of wearing black for a year gave lamenters some room to recover. It also gives them some respect as they worked through their grief.

Last year, we lost two members of our community; Bud and Marian. Many of you did not know Marian because she had stopped coming about two years before she died. Until she was about 85, Marian seemed to be in good health and drove herself all the way from her home near Longwood Gardens to be with us, even in some pretty bad weather. She would often send me items of interest from the web. She was engaged, funny, and very much alive. Those of us who knew her, miss her.

And then there is Bud, whose anniversary is tomorrow. What more can we say about Bud, who was a most loving, kind, joyful person? Bud's rapid decline last year rather defined the life of our community for one terrible month. Yet during that time of suffering for Bud and his wife, Cass, we were fortunate to witness Bud's grace and his courage in what were daunting circumstances. Speaking for myself, Bud was a shining

light and a source of grace and inspiration to me. I think I said last year at his funeral service that I would not be who I am without Bud.

All of us have loved ones, friends and family who have been shining lights, sources of grace, and loving support who are now members of the Communion of Saints, a concept that has become much more important and dear to me as the years go by and more and more people that I love are there rather than here.

When I was a younger person, sad to say, I used to make fun of my mother who, with my aunt when she was alive, faithfully visited the graves of my father and grandparents and great aunts every Christmas and Easter season. They're not there, I'd tell her. Now, I regard these visits as a blessing. My father is buried with my mother's grandparents and her cousin who died as a young man as the result of an industrial accident. My mother's name and date of birth is already chiseled on the stone. It must feel weird for her to think about being in that grave more sooner than later.

My great-grandparents with whom my father is buried were born in the 1860's-70's. They are my grandchildren's great-great-great grandparents. I always loved history, including family history. The names of my ancestors were important to me. However, I ask myself, when my mother passes away, will I continue to visit the graves? Will my grandchildren even care to remember Robert and Margaret Lewis, whom I never knew? Or, will the names on the tombstone just fade away with their memory?

My Uncle Joe, who was my godfather, even though we were never close, kept his communion of saints in a drawer in his dresser. After he died, I tried to clean out the house, which was and is still in my grandmother's, who died in 1973, name. As I was throwing things out or putting them in piles to give away, I came across a huge stack of holy cards from the funerals he had attended over the course of his long, 92 year life. Since we never really had a serious conversation about anything, I have no idea why he kept those cards and added to them over the course of years. I know I was touched when I found them and felt badly about throwing them out. He was such a gruff guy, I would have never thought that he was sentimental in any way.

I keep my communion of saints on my refrigerator, along the frame of the mirror in my bedroom, and on the file cabinet next to my desk at work. Bud is on my fridge with my Aunt Peg and my brother. Marian is on my bulletin board. My childhood friend Mary is on my mirror along with my father-in-law. And my friend, Alice is on my file cabinet at work. Lest I forget. Lest I forget.

I usually try to do the Merle Reagle crossword puzzle in the Inquirer each Sunday. When I try to do the NY Times, it always makes me feel far too dumb, so most weeks, I don't even try. Anyway, the theme of last week's puzzle was, appropriately, "Angels and Demons" with both words appearing within large words or phrases.

The puzzle reminded me that another part of the month of November is to remember those who were less than satisfactory family members. The people who suck out all of your energy but you can't disown them because they are family. Those whose actions and behaviors might have frightened you and yours. Those who have written a script for their lives that bears no semblance to reality. Those annoying people who were like buzzing flies on a hot summer day. Those family members who might have injured us or even those family members we still have trouble forgiving.

I learned the name of Anais Nin while doing crossword puzzles, but I've never actually read any of her works. Yet her quotes keep on cropping up in my life; one in the "Angels and Demons" Sunday puzzle. What kills love? Nin's answer is anxiety. "Anxiety is love's greatest killer. It makes others feel as you might when a drowning man holds on to you. You want to save the man, but you know he will strangle you in his panic." I think that I've been sent enough signs that I need to read her book. Anxiety, neediness, jealousy, fear, trauma, there is, I'm sure, an emotion for all of us that has been a cause of separation in our own families and neighborhoods and church communities.

There is, of course, a fine line between remembering the past and dwelling in it- and we know who those past dwellers are and what their permanent residence in a land that no longer exists does to the rest of us. But, at the end of the day, there is something to learn from our angels

and demons both in our personal past and the past of our ancestors. We should never forget this. The past is useful in the lessons it has, hopefully, taught us, individually and collectively. Without the grace of lessons learned, we would make the same mistakes even more frequently that we already do. Operating with a selective memory doesn't do any good for anyone.

The month of All Souls gives us permission to take a short trip into the past to re-visit the vast cloud of witnesses – the angels as well as the demons- who surround us. It's a time to visit the dead and what they have meant to us without feeling morbid. Sad, maybe, but not morbid. It's a time for us to realize that our great and loving God has a purpose for all of us, that there is always a place set at the table, regardless of the mistakes we've made.

So, during this month, let's welcome the ghosts and the witches, the clowns and the super heroes, the saints and the sinners as the trees lose their leaves and darkness falls around us, not with fear and with the love that eventually, in God's good time, sets all things right.

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