

ALL SOULS

Every May 11 we celebrate the feast of a group of men known as the holy abbots of Cluny: Odo, Maieul, Odilo, Hugh, and Peter the Venerable, but I dare say they are mostly just names to us, without any sense of what might have characterized the life of any one of them in particular. St. Odilo, however, is very relevant to what we are commemorating today, All Souls, for he is important in Church history for two things above all. First, although his Cluniac predecessors were constantly called to reform other monasteries, these monasteries preserved their independence once the reform was complete. In many cases nothing further was needed, but many other reformed communities soon slipped back into their old ways. Odilo sought to prevent this by having a reformed monastery be subject permanently to Cluny. In this sense, he could be said to have given the church its first religious order properly so-called. Secondly, Odilo also left the Church a legacy of another kind, for it was he who started the practice of commemorating the deceased monks of his order on the day after All Saints, and from this narrowly Cluniac practice the celebration of All Souls Day gradually spread to the whole Church. This annual commemoration comes from our instinctive desire to do whatever we can to aid those who have died but are in need of further purification before attaining full communion with God in heavenly bliss, a desire coupled with our belief in the saving efficacy of Christ's death and resurrection in every celebration of the Eucharist.

But even as we pray today—and in a special way throughout the month of November—for our beloved dead, All Souls Day inevitably calls upon us to reflect on the fact that one day we, too, will be numbered among these “holy souls”—in other words, it calls us to reflect upon our own impending death, however near or distant it may be, and upon how we ought to prepare

for it. In this respect, there is much to be learned from the example of certain persons who have faced their own deaths with open eyes and much courage. I'd like to single out two such persons, ones who have figured in the course I am currently teaching in our school. One of these is Archbishop Oscar Romero, not (or at least not yet) numbered among the canonized saints but already commonly called St. Oscar among the peoples of Latin America. Here was a man well aware that the stance he had taken against a repressive government could well cost him his life, especially because of the powerful homilies that he had broadcast throughout El Salvador every Sunday, but in an interview he gave just two weeks before his assassination, he had this to say:

I have often been threatened with death. I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection.... I say so without boasting, with the greatest humility. As a shepherd, I am obliged by divine mandate to give my life for those I love—for all Salvadorans, even for those who may be going to kill me. If the threats are carried out, from this moment I offer my blood to God for the redemption and for the resurrection of El Salvador.... If they succeed in killing me, I pardon and bless those who do it. Would, indeed, that they might be convinced that they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but God's church, which is the people, will never perish.¹

Although Oscar Romero knew that he *might* well be killed, he could not be certain about it. Another saintly person of recent times knew very well that, without a stupendous miracle, she would die relatively young. Sr. Thea Bowman was a Franciscan sister whom I once had the privilege of meeting. Her joy and vivacity that day were remarkable and truly memorable, but

some years later she learned that she had breast cancer and that the disease had spread so widely that there was no hope for a medical cure. Like most people, she was at first despondent over the diagnosis, but before long she drew on the example of so many persons she had known growing up in a fervent African-American community in Mississippi. Just like Oscar Romero, she has left us some precious interviews given in the months before her death. In one of these, to the interviewer's question of what she saw ahead of her, she replied:

Live for a while and then death. It's as simple as that. When I first found out I had cancer, I didn't know what to pray for.... Then I found peace in praying for what my folks call "God's perfect will." As it evolved, my prayer has become, "Lord, let me live until I die." By that I mean I want to live, love, and serve fully until death comes. If that prayer is answered, if I am able to live until I die, how long really doesn't matter.... I grew up with people who believed you could serve the Lord from a sickbed or a deathbed.... As long as I have my mental facility, I want to keep on loving. I want to keep on serving. That's what I hope to be about.

My illness has helped me to realize how fragile our hold on life is. I always thought I was going to live to be an old woman.... But I no longer think that. My time isn't long. Now I just want to find ways to make the most of the time I have left.²

All of us surely admire the sentiments expressed by those two exemplary Catholics, but I am also sure that there are plenty of other persons who will never be as well known as Oscar Romero and Thea Bowman but who have approached—or are approaching—death with similar

faith, love, and acceptance of what Thea called “God’s perfect will.” As we continue with our celebration of the Eucharist this morning, let us pray that it may strengthen those sentiments in ourselves as well.

¹ Oscar Romero, quoted in *Modern Spiritual Masters*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 74-75.

² Thea Bowman, quoted *ibid.*, 140-41.