

All Souls' Day and the hope of eternal memory



My Aunt Liz, my mother's younger sister, passed away unexpectedly on Oct. 30. The death of a loved one at any time of year is emotionally tough; but there's something about a death in the fall, when nature itself seems to be passing away (at least here in the Midwest, where I've lived nearly all of my life), that leaves me even more somber and melancholic.

As I write this at 8 p.m. on All Saints' Day, it's as dark as midnight outside my window. It will be just as dark at 6 a.m. tomorrow – All Souls' Day – when I wake up for my morning run. Father Tony Steinacker will offer Mass for the Holy Souls at Sts. Peter and Paul here in Huntington, Indiana, at 7:30 p.m. – once again in the dark, after, perhaps, a typical gray November day.

I don't mind being melancholic on All Souls' Day. If melancholy is good for anything, it's for stimulating the memory. And tomorrow there will be a lot to remember – good times and some not so good; holiday joy and family fights; and the golden threads running through it all of our shared history and heritage and, above all, our shared faith. My Catholicism comes from my mother's family, and Aunt Liz remained a Catholic to the end, not simply despite but even, I suspect, because of the trials and pains and sorrows in her life.

As fall darkens its way into winter, we retreat indoors into the warmth and the light. Here in the Midwest, these months are a time for family, a time when, whether we want it to or not, the world forces us closer together. Many of my most fond memories of Aunt Liz and my mother's family center on

Thanksgiving and Christmas, from my earliest recollections of holidays in my grandmother's old house after my grandfather passed away nearly 50 years ago, to turkey dinners around makeshift tables at Uncle Paul and Aunt Molly's, or Aunt Liz and Uncle Denny's – all now gone to their rest, along with the first of my cousins, Ted, and all before their time.

The rest of us will gather this coming Saturday at Aunt Liz's parish in Essexville, Michigan, to say our goodbyes and to pray for the repose of her soul. In the years since my grandmother passed away the day before the First Sunday in Advent 2002, we've celebrated fewer holidays together and spent more time reminiscing at wakes and funerals. That is the way of all flesh: Where Aunt Liz has gone, we will someday follow, and some of us sooner than we expect.

Tempus fugit; memento mori. Time flies; remember death. Or as that most melancholic and yet hopeful hymn puts it: "Time, like an ever-rolling stream, Bears all its sons away; They fly, forgotten, as a dream Dies at the opening day."

We cannot stop time, but we can choose to remember death and, in remembering our death, to remember those who, in the words of the Eucharistic prayer, "have died and gone before us, marked with the sign of faith."

"In baptism," the prayer continues, "they died with Christ. May they also share in his resurrection." This is the reality of the Communion of Saints, bound together in baptism in a bond that even death cannot break. We, the living, pray for those who still live, but we pray also for the dead, "that they may be loosed from their sins." And they, in turn, pray for us, that when the light fades from our eyes and the world slowly forgets our name, we may not be forgotten forever but, in the glorious dawn of the everlasting day, enjoy eternal memory.

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