

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

For All The Saints

On the whole, I find the presence of the saints a friendly one. This needs saying, since their presence provoked such a tide of fear and hatred in the religion of our forefathers 400 years ago. The orgy of destruction of their images, in stone and glass and frescoed walls, which marked the Reformation, is a sad instance of a defeat for human imagination and affection which many Catholics find hard to understand, a place where only forgiveness is appropriate.

A Season For The Departed

Autumn is with us: a time, I feel, for kindness; because it is darkening, and chill is setting in, and the processes of death are quietly taking over the world. In the midst of all this, there is life to be lived that is faithful, enduring, courageous, listening for wisdom, learning patience in a set of circumstances that cannot be changed. How wisely the Church placed the energetic exercises of Lent in a different season (alas for Oz)! In the face of the inexorable, Christian life finds itself obedient, trusting, and increasingly aware of the mystery called "providence". Those the Church formally recognizes as "saints" have all passed through the gates of death; but she proclaims the holiness also of the living, and of the dead whose sanctity is known only to God. In November we remember them. All Saints is a great and triumphant solemnity, recalling the heroic sanctity of a great cloud of witnesses, in whose lives we have seen the glory of God. All Souls is a more reflective moment, where we allow ourselves to sense the vast hosts of the dead. In the anniversary of the Armistice of 1918 we recall the dead in war. It is a secular moment, with the Monarch, the politicians, and the survivors playing their various rôles in ceremony; but we cannot hold any ceremony for the dead without our religious heritage setting the tone. Our whole attitude to the dead is set, coloured, scented with the spirit of these days of remembrance.

Not Letting Go

Memory is an astonishing faculty, a sort of time-travelling capacity. It is, like all great gifts, powerful for good and for evil. Some people find themselves paralysed by their memories, dominated every day by the cruelties or failures they have known. Some people are prevented from any good experience in the present, by the

inability to surrender the good things they have lost. But on the positive side, memory can bring the happiness of the past flooding back, fresh and vibrant, into a grey present: how frequently a chance encounter can revivify a sudden forgotten insight, a treasure that has lain buried. A wafted scent from a wallflower bed under spring sun, the sound of the sea, a particular colour in the evening sky, a phrase of music unheard for years, and memory has resurrected our past self, with all its vulnerability, all its delight. This is not a painful reality, but a joyous one. It has something about it of the covenant, in which God shows himself faithful.

Even The Least

In holding the memory of the saints, we too partake in God's faithfulness. We do not worship them, as some think, or look to them for our salvation. But we know in them something of the breadth, and height, and depth of the love of God for the poor. I don't confine my memories of the saints to the canonized ones. I remember the ones I knew face to face, carrying tool-boxes and mixing-bowls, wearing cloth caps or aprons. In the low, golden light of these dying days of autumn, we can see a shining that is nothing to do with earthly hopes, and everything to do with God's providence. The Church is right to give us the saints to venerate. Let us share with them a happy feast!

Fr Philip