

COMMENTARY

FOR THE MONTH OF NOVEMBER. All Saints and All Souls: the joy of the Church in the triumph of her saints is at once mingled with her intercession for the souls that suffer still. There is a sense in which the conscience of Christians is in the keeping of the dead, for they are the ones who have achieved the whole purpose of man's making. For them the issue is over: already they are secure and final judgment can only confirm a sentence already given—the absolute reward of heaven or hell, and for the Holy Souls the time of purging with heaven at last to come.

The Christian life at every moment is lived within these dimensions, but it is hard in imagination to see the absorbing pattern of life with all its demands on mind and will as the passing reality it truly is. But in November the reminders of man's mortality are sure enough. The dying year itself is eloquent of that universal death which is the one certain event that awaits all men. And on All Souls Day the terrible words of the *Dies Irae* evoke, with a realism too candid for usual consciences, the immutable fact of judgment. *Ne me perdas illa die.*

But the meaning is more than a monition, an annual warning that death will come. It is at its deepest level an assertion of the community of the faithful in Christ. The Judge is the Saviour too:

*Recordare, Jesu pie,
Quod sum causa tuae viae.*

God has taken man's nature not that he may despise it, but that he may redeem and restore it. The Judge is a brother, for it is precisely the nature that he has assumed which he will declare blessed or condemned. We are judged in our humanity, in that which we are and in that which God has sanctified and made his own. And the Holy Souls are not a sort of ghosts, disembodied as though to be less than human, other than us in their nature and in their need. They look for their release and the pain they know is that of longing for God, a joy delayed but certain in the end. They are what we must hope to be, and that is why our prayers are offered for their speedy admission into Heaven. They are on their way and we must want to speed them on their way. So it is that the Roman Martyrology announces this 'solemn com-

memoration of all the faithful departed in which the Church, their common Mother, after being careful to celebrate with due praise her children already rejoicing in Heaven on All Saints' Day, strives to help all those who still long in Purgatory by supplication to Christ, her Lord and Bridegroom, that they may quickly attain to the fellowship of the heavenly citizens'.

We live in an age that has grown used to death. Familiarity does not indeed—nor can it ever—banish fear, but it can perhaps make fear less holy. The holocausts of war can numb the heart. The war memorials in every town and village have their catalogues of names and with the years the names grow less familiar, the ceremony of remembering less spontaneous in its grief. And 'grief' is the word that can darken counsel here. For the true pain of death lies in the fact of separation: to those who remain the parting from those who were loved, but to those who have died the far deeper pain of separation still from the final joy of Heaven. But for living and dead alike the separation has its certain ending, this pain its certain joy. That is why St Catherine of Genoa can say that 'there is no joy comparable to that of a soul in Purgatory, except the joy of the Blessed in Paradise. For every sight, however little, that can be gained of God exceeds every pain and every joy that man can conceive without it'.

The Holy Souls are our forerunners and our prayers on their behalf are an assertion of our common end. The month of their commemoration is a time for the living no less, for they in God's mercy await that same healing pain, the sense that without God all else is loss.

CATHOLIC REVIEWS AND CHRISTIAN OPINION. In next month's issue of BLACKFRIARS two of the lectures given at the Writers' Conference at Spode House last July will be printed: 'The Problem of Communication' by Renée Haynes, and 'Lord Acton and Catholic Reviews' by Roland Hill. The same issue will also include the third article in Fr Henry St John's series on 'Authority'.