# **All Souls Day 2017**

This has been an important week for Christians of all traditions. Wednesday marked the 500th anniversary of what has become an almost legendary event when the Augustinian Monk, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the church in the small German town of Wittenberg.

People still argue over the details, but intentionally or not, this event has come to represent the unleashing of seismic developments and divisions among the followers of Christ.

This is not the place or the occasion to dwell on these sad and often bitterly violent divisions, except to acknowledge that one of the points of difference that did emerge concerned how we ought to approach the doctrine of Purgatory; and whether it is appropriate to pray and celebrate the Eucharist on behalf of the dead. Disputes that began among serious theologians eventually hardened into entrenched doctrines and practices which still endure in some circles.

Happily for us, by small, incremental steps, some of these disputes and misunderstandings have received careful consideration by Christians of all persuasions, motivated by a sincere desire for Christian unity.

I want to stake a claim that our own John Henry Newman made some contribution to this. My evidence for this claim comes in the reactions of several non-Catholic commentators to the publication of Newman’s great poem *The Dream of Gerontius*.

The poem was published by installments in 1865, and it relates an imaginary dream in which Gerontius undergoes an experience that takes him from his death bed, where he is accompanied by friends, a priest and his guardian angel up to the moment of death. After this he describes an experience of knowing himself to be held in the arms of an angel carrying him through judgement and a tantalizing glimpse of God’s glory, into purgatory. All the while still hearing the voices of his earthbound friends, to whom are now added, other angelic helpers; while demons chatter ineffectually in the background.

Surprisingly, given the times in which he wrote, the poem’s quality was recognized by some who would not have been among Newman’s natural supporters. Even Charles Kingsley who had previously questioned his integrity commented in a letter:

“I read *The Dream* with awe and admiration… the central idea is as true as it is noble… it is the longing of the soul to behold Deity [which after a fleeting glimpse] is ready, even glad to be hurled back to any depth, to endure any pain, from the moment it becomes aware of God’s actual perfection and its own utter impurity and meanness.”

Kingsley was not alone in his admiration; Gladstone compared its impact to the works of Dante. The same comparison was made by a Presbyterian divine, Dr. Alexander Whyte. And General Gordon turned to it for solace as his own death drew near.

Newman’s transition from being an exemplary and Anglican to an equally effective Catholic took place when the tensions among us were still rife with mutual suspicion but the intervening years have seen a flourishing of initiatives that have brought the patrimony of different traditions into more creative cooperation.

On Wednesday at Westminster Abbey, during a service commemorating for Luther’s Wittenberg protest, the Archbishop of Canterbury referenced how far we have travelled when he said something we all know to be true; namely that “Catholics and Anglicans have learned once again to love one another” to which I would add so many other faith traditions.

Coming together in love is the very heart of the Eucharist; it is also the genius of the creative arts.

Great music has emerged from every major strand of Christianity, from the unaccompanied psalm chants of Wee Free Presbyterians to the glorious polyphonies of Catholicism and Anglicanism, to name just two examples. And Newman’s words, as we know, were set to music by Sir Edward Elgar.

This blending of the words of faith with sublime music is characteristic of authentic Christianity.

Our Eucharist this evening is testament to this. Like many of our greatest composers, Faure has set the words of the Requiem Mass to music that transports us into realms we cannot fully describe or comprehend. What we are about in the Eucharist transcends performance and immerses us in a communion beyond the boundaries of time and space, connecting us with our sisters and brothers who have passed beyond the limitations of earthly life.

The poet W.H. Auden wrote: *“Through art, we are able to break bread with the dead, and without communion with the dead, a fully human life is impossible.”*

In acknowledging our appreciation to those who have made the journey here twice this week to rehearse and now pray this artful worship I would like to quote yet another poet, Emily Dickinson, who observed that:

*This world is not a conclusion;*

*A sequel stands beyond,*

*Invisible as music,*

*But positive, as sound.*

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