
Commemorating the deceased: the last caress amidst the swirling storm

I suppose that the images of the military trucks transporting the coffins of coronavirus victims that on the evening of last March 18 left Bergamo headed towards the crematoriums of many Italian cities, are considered by many as an icon of the upcoming November 2, 2020, when the commemoration of all the deceased assumes a very intense dimension. However, I would like to view it against the backdrop of an ecclesial context and a personal remembrance. During the swirling storm, when hospitals had no more space for the dead, whose bodies started to be piled up in the morgue, public and health authorities contacted the diocese to find a solution in order to offer a final caress to those who had been torn away from their families. Women and men who died in solitude, far from their loved ones, assisted by doctors and nurses who were often worn out, and in many cases even acted as intermediaries for a last cherished and precious blessing from the Lord.

I proposed that the church of the city cemetery dedicated to All Saints would be their warm embrace, as a gesture of caring by the Christian community and by civil society, entrusting them to the merciful Father.

The departed, left without the closeness of their beloved ones even during the funeral service, would thus feel the closeness of the Saints arranged in a circle in the large mosaic of that church, one next to the other, forming a procession, like a community gathered around them to pray with them and for them, accompanying them and opening to them the gates of Paradise. In that procession of Saints I also humbly included myself, on behalf of the whole diocese, of all the families, of all our communities, as a gesture of unity between the Church in heaven and the Church still pilgrim on earth, among which those dead became “pontiffs”, true builders of a precious bridge. This is my personal memory. The previous day, alone, in the semi-darkness of those walls where only the golden mosaics of the apse outlined a faint, albeit glowing horizon, as a pilgrim I blessed coffin after coffin in silence, my hand that made the sign of the cross in the air was like a last caress to each one of those victims, and through them I could reach every soul of our many faithful who left us those days. *Spontaneously flowed from my lips a plea to the Lord to grant unto them eternal rest and let His perpetual light shine upon them. From my weeping heart, full of tears that I could hardly hold back, almost unexpectedly, another prayer arose, the prayer to the guardian angel. I instinctively asked them, whom I felt in communion with all the Saints, to enlighten our uncertain steps, to guard our homes threatened by the virus, to sustain and protect our frightened and wounded hearts, to direct and guide us towards salvation, entrusted to them by heavenly mercy, that is, by the love of God that they could now contemplate face to face.* That day, All Saints' Church in the cemetery of Bergamo, symbolizing the Community of All Saints in Heaven, was a gospel of life that overcomes death, a humble hallelujah that fills the silence of tears, pale dawn that pierces the darkest shadows, a hope of resurrection that strips the cross - every heavy cross that the virus imposed on the shoulders of so many lives and so many families - the right to have the last word. Thus was that day for me, and so may it be for everyone honouring the memory of the mystery that we celebrate on November 2 remembering our loved ones. (*)*bishop of Bergamo*

Francesco Beschi (*)