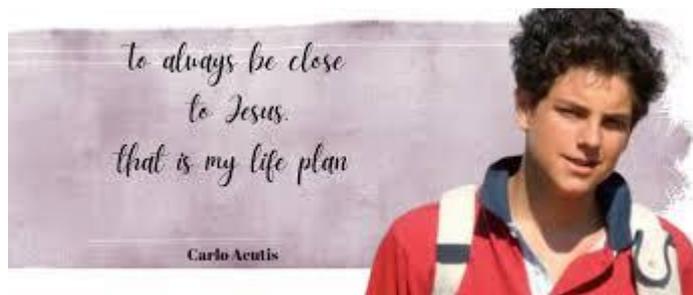


Homily for All Saints Day



I was standing looking at the dead body of a young guy in a glass case, and slightly wondering why.

This was in Assisi recently and it was the body of a new saint, Carlo Acutis, (he was being beatified, the stage before full sainthood,) which was being displayed in a church. He died in 2006 at the age of 15 of leukemia.

Before I had thought to myself, "Do I want to go and see his body? Why would I do that? Was it foolish?" But in the end I decided to queue up, almost because it was there. (As you can imagine there was not a lot of social-distancing being done in the Italian queue.) Who was in the queue? All sorts of people, but a lot of young people, many people probably like me with all sorts of different motives for doing so. And there his body was, just as if he was still 15.

In the evening, the night before his beatification, we had a wander round Assisi, really to see the view of the valley and all its lights below the town. But what we came across was all the churches open, well into the night, and little chapels and rooms everywhere, light slipping out through the doors into the dark street, where people were praying before the Blessed Sacrament. We stopped outside a small church and prayed outside. Being English we did not want to disturb them by going in, but we could stand there praying quite happily. Again there were lots of young people praying too.

We met an American journalist working for the Vatican and she wanted a story from us, but we were not quite what she was looking for. If I may say so on behalf of the group, we were not young (except at heart of course) and had not come from the States or for the beatification. In fact I had never heard of him. But she said he was very famous among young American Catholics.

What had he done? Apparently he had lived a very good life, a generous life, and he had decided, before he died of leukemia, that the best way he could spread the message of Jesus was through the internet. On his website he had gathered the different places where Mary had appeared to show people when and why. A sort of teaching, evangelising website. And in prayer he was dedicated to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. But besides all this he had lived as a normal teenager. So why sainthood? People had felt called to ask for it because of the effect he had on others and there has it seems been a miracle ascribed to him in Brazil.

You might think, 'He does not sound that much like a normal teenager to me.' But then 'Who is?' Or 'Who was?' (Admittedly some of us were 15 before teenagers were thought of!)

What is important is the preaching, the spreading of Jesus' message, by whatever means work.

What about the body though? Why that? Why queue up to see it? There is, somehow, something deeply human in this and something deeply Christian. The human is the desire to be close to someone important to us. To venerate, respect, love those important to us. Hence the bodies of Lenin and Chairman Mao were on display for years.

For Christians we have to remember two things. Firstly that we believe in life after death. There is nothing morbid about death, or shouldn't be, for us. (Though it is often sad.) The fear of bodies is a relatively new thing. The need to avoid the word 'death' when we say, 'She has passed over,' 'Gone to the other side' or 'popped her clogs etc.'

In the early church people accepted that death was a stage in our journey. Coffins were open to say goodbye to the deceased, and pray for them as they met God.

As for saints, they became examples and a means to be close to God. Churches were built in their honour, relics were kept in the altar as they still are in older churches.

A priest wrote recently: “St. Augustine wrote at the end of the fourth century that the bodies of the deceased are “in no way . . . to be despised . . . for they are more intimately and closely united to us than any garment; for they belong to man’s very nature. . . .” From the very beginnings of the church, Christians venerated the bodies of the martyrs. Many Masses were celebrated upon the very coffins of those witnesses. This is not worship of the dead. St. Jerome wrote around the same time as Augustine: “We honour the martyrs’ relics, so that thereby we give honour to God whose witness they are: we honour the servants, that the honour shown to them may reflect on their Master. . . .

At the end of a funeral we bless and incense the body out of respect for the very thing that carried a person through life, but more than that, it was an indivisible part of that person. It was how we knew them. Loved them. We cannot divide the body from the personality.

The body is also how God became human, the incarnation, the taking on of flesh literally. It is through our bodies that we are able to serve God and each other. It is how we live out our lives.

In his life Carlo Acutis drew many people to God and to prayer. In his death he is doing the same thing.

You may still not feel comfortable about dead bodies on display, but the essential thing about all those saints we remember this feast day, is that they lived to make God present to us, and after their earthly death this is still their desire for us. That they might help us follow them to heaven.