

A Great Day

A homily by Fr. Matthew Kelty OCSO

Luke 3.10-18

"From a sudden and unprovided death, deliver us, Lord."

This petition is from the Litany of the Saints, heard at ordination vows and at the Holy Saturday baptismal rite. The needs are always there, if the petitions are not. Sudden death is never welcome, and to die unprepared seems tragic to the pious. So, one prays for a seasonable death and time for repentance: "Pray for us sinners now at the hour of our death."

Father Louis' (Thomas Merton's) death was sudden. One thinks of it also as provident and provided. His whole Asian journey was a pilgrimage, so his state of soul would have been appropriate to any design of God. His death was in the design of God, the point of pilgrimage. Which is what Jean Leclercq had in mind, presumably, when told the news in Bangkok: "C'est magnifique!" "How splendid a leave-taking", as if Father Louis had staged it.

It was Tuesday in the second week of Advent at Gethsemani, meaning Gethsemani farm work for most, and that for some weeks. Father Timothy was the reader at the noon meal. The book was a biography of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. As the meal came to a close, Abbot Flavian got up from his place, walked to the reader's table, signed the reader to stop, picked up the microphone and said, "Brothers, I have

sad news for you. Father Louis has died in Bangkok. That's all I know. I'll let you know as soon as I hear more." We said the closing meal prayer and the day went on.

The abbot had received the message at 10 o'clock that morning. The telegram read, "Abbot Burns. Trappist, P. O. Gethsemani, KY. Department regrets to inform you the following message received for you from American Embassy Bangkok Thailand. 'Informed by Abbot Weakland that Thomas Merton has died.' Mr. Hobart Luppi, Director Special Consular Services. Department of State."

Father Louis had died on Wednesday the 11th at around 3 o'clock or earlier in the afternoon. It was Tuesday the 10th here, 12 hours ahead. We were getting up for Vigils.

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Some years ago I travelled by horse with a Father along mountain tracks for some six hours or more in cold, heavy rain. The trail was dangerous, slippery shale, soft mud, steep drops. We often had to lead the horses. When the little mission center finally came into view, Father Gehlen said to me, "Someone's on the front porch waiting out the rain. I know who it is. It's the Seventh Day Adventist pastor. I don't care, though. After all this cold and wet, we're going to have a glass of rum, despite his views on Rome and rum." Which we did.

After a change, we sat down for a small visit. In the midst of the small talk, he said, "It's gonna be a Great Day." I said, "Sir?" He said, "It's gonna be a Great Day."

"What do you mean?"

"You know. Armageddon, the Valley of Jehosephat, and the Final Judgment."

I was so taken aback I laughed. He was puzzled that I laughed. I told him that Catholics believe in the Second Coming as much as he did and were doing it long before there were any Seventh Day Adventists. "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His Kingdom will have no end." It's in the Mass. "We wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior."

"But," I said, "we hardly have it up front all the time. It's rather an unconscious awareness, but an awareness for all that. We think about death, too, but don't have a casket ready in the basement."

Death is our first encounter with the Last Day. Advent is a preparation for such, both our own and the ultimate. We are deeply involved in both. We shall all die in turn, and we will all be present at the Last Great Day. However late, however early, and assuredly sudden, whenever.

It would seem we pray that the end - either of them - be not too sudden. Most of all not *morte improvisa*, not a death unprovided for. The first is an appropriate petition; the last, essential. We trust the Lord understands that.

Today is Gaudete Sunday, Rejoice Sunday. You can wear colorful vesture

exceptionally if you like. Yet, ours is not a joyful age. Most who know us do not see Americans as an especially happy people. We don't look it. Not to others. Maybe not even to ourselves.

The Southwest Indians said to Carl Jung about white people, "Why are they so angry?" How we look is not the major interest, of course.

But there is no need to be glum because the end is coming - yours, mine, all creation. It may be sudden. I'd say your happiness is a good sign that you're provided for. I mean to say, you are right with God, with me, with all your brothers and sisters, yourself and everyone else. That being so, be glad you have work, can pray, are adequately housed and fed, clothed and cared for, warm and dry in a setting of beauty and peace. You have reason, may it be said, so rejoice. So have I. If by some gift I could tell you how much longer you've got, perhaps your joy would only increase. Even so, this is someone's last Advent.

It was a significant trip for Father Louis. And his last. It's gonna be a Great Day, as the man said. Sudden be it, if it must. Provided for, certainly. Hopefully, not too soon. There's no hurry.

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