

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on All Saints' Day
November 1, 2015

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“Father, I have been in great battles without ever flinching at the cannon’s roar,” exclaimed a soldier attending a preaching mission. “But when I listen to you I tremble from head to foot.” The soldier was talking to St Paul of the Cross, about whom I knew little when preparing to preach at a weekday Mass on October 20, 1998, in my first year as a Catholic priest.

Anglicans did not have Paul Frances Daney in their church calendar. So I found myself doing some research before Mass. What I found were all sorts of tributes like that of the soldier. The cumulative effect of this witness was that in the middle of the 18th century no one was a more sought-after preacher on the Passion of Christ than St Paul of the Cross. Cross in hand, arms outstretched, Paul of the Cross was a striking figure. His words were said to pierce even the stoniest of hearts. A community gathered around St Paul and after its formal establishment became commonly known as *The Passionists*.

Here was more than enough material for my sermon at Mass on October 20, 1998. But after Mass I still wanted to know more. Here is what I found. Paul was Italian. He never went to England. But he was strangely drawn to pray for England and its conversion. Nothing seemed more unlikely in the mid-18th century than a sunny and passionate Italian praying for the conversion of cold, rationalist, and protestant England! But there it was. It didn’t make any sense. There was not the remote possibility of anything ever coming of it. But Paul of the Cross could not get away from what was made very clear to him. He wrote, “Let us pray for England. I could not help doing so, even if I wished, for as soon as I begin to pray, that unhappy kingdom comes before me. I remember her every morning in the Holy Mass, and have done so for forty years. What may be God’s intentions for that kingdom I know not. Well, let us pray on, and leave the issue in God’s hands.”

As we will see, what God was doing was something we say we believe when we recite the Creed, but don’t fully understand. And it brings us close to the heart of what we observe on All Saints’ Day. In a wonderful way, Almighty God was leaving the issue of England in the hands of Fr Paul of the Cross.

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Paul went to God on October 18, 1775. Seventy years later, almost to the day, on October 8, 1845, a priest of Fr Paul's Passionist Order, named Dominic Barbieri, arrived at a place called Littlemore, near Oxford, England, heard the confession of John Henry Newman, and next day received him into Holy Mother Church. One hundred seventy years later that conversion still serves as a model for asking the right questions and finding the right answers, as many Christians find a way not to perpetuate schism but heal it. Today in England there are more Catholics than Anglicans in Church on Sundays.

On the Thursday in 1998 when we commemorated the Feast of St Paul of the Cross the gospel was the Lord's parable on *watchfulness*. With it Jesus told Peter and the others that the master will put the faithful servant in charge of all his property. When St Paul the Apostle wrote, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (I Cor 3:6) he was witnessing to the *connection* between all these things: St Paul of the Cross, Fr Dominic Barberi, and Newman's conversion. Paul had prayed for the conversion of England for forty years at daily Mass. Were there others, unknown to us, doing the same? Sure there were the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, with SS Thomas More and John Fisher, in Heaven. But were there holy souls who were *still part of the Church militant*, doing the same, and who were, and are still, known only to God? I wondered. Had there been men and women praying for *my* conversion? I found out there were. The Benedictine sisters at Petersham. Two women in Galesburg, Illinois, who made our St Athanasius banner which arrived in time for my first Mass on Pentecost in 1998.

Are there others today, quietly and consistently, praying for the things God wants to do in the arena of human endeavor, and which will be put into effect by the prayers of holy men and women? The answer is *yes*. That is part of what we mean by the communion of saints, a window into the inner working of Christ's Church. It is our Lord Jesus Himself Who assured us of the honor His Father pays to the saints. "If any man serve Me, him will My Father honor." But there is no medal-bestowing ceremony! Not only is Almighty God *gracious* to the whole company of the perfected friends of Jesus. The Lord Himself tells us "of a truth I say into you, that He will make him ruler over all that He hath." In the communion of saints, as

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St James once explained, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." (5:16) How much?

In a strange and wonderful way it is promised that Almighty God has put the affairs of salvation into the hands of men and women praying daily and faithfully for God's will to be done.