

Homily for Martin of Tours, Bishop of Tours, 397

November 11, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Isaiah 58:6–12; Psalm 15; Matthew 25:34–40*

My family moved from Virginia Beach to Fairfax County, Virginia, in the summer of 1966. That fall, I entered seventh grade. Being so close to Washington, D.C., the National Gallery of Art is a place for school trips. I started Spanish that year and continued with it in college. I'm sure it was in my senior year that our teacher took our small class to see Spanish art at the National Gallery. El Greco's painting of Saint Martin and the Beggar, depicting the story of him cutting his cloak in half and giving it to a man in need, is one of the National Gallery's treasures. That would have been in 1971 or 1972. I was in a public high school. Religion wasn't entirely absent from history and literature classes.

A decade later, I was in seminary when Princeton University Professor Peter Brown's lectures at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1978 were published. Its title was *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. After some remarks about how Jewish, Christian, and others understood the possibility, or not, of an afterlife,

Brown writes about the graves of saints. By the end of the sixth century, graves of the holy departed were, in Brown's words, "centers of the ecclesial life of their region" . . . he continued, "This was because the saint in Heaven was believed to be 'present' at his tomb on earth."<sup>1</sup> Martin, bishop of Tours, who died on the eighth of November in the year 397, had been bishop of Tours since about the year 372.<sup>2</sup> This is his English translation of the inscription on his tomb: "Here lies Martin the bishop, of holy memory, whose soul is in the hand of God; but he is fully here, present and made plain in miracles of every kind."<sup>3</sup>

What Christians did with their dead was new and thought to be an abomination by pagans and Jews. The dead were not buried within cities. Family shrines in the Roman world were not uncommon for those who owned their dwellings. Christian belief took the relationship of the dead to the living and the living to the dead to a new place. Martyrs had a special place in the development of the Christian religion. Dying as Christ died for the faith meant the martyrs had, to use Brown's words, "intimacy with God." Therefore, they

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Martin, St.," 879–80.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, 4.

could intercede and protect the living.<sup>4</sup> A martyr's grave was a place where "Heaven and Earth met."<sup>5</sup>

It's been almost a decade since Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnsons' book, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*, came out. I've quoted before their reference to the work of a French liturgical scholar Cyrille Vogel, who died in 1982. Vogel observed, [quote] "up until the end of the middle of the second century ancient burial inscriptions reveal that Christians prayed both for and to deceased Christians, whether they were martyrs or not."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>6</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 180.