

# Requiem Mass for Richard E. Livingston

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July 2, 2011

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

One of the most difficult aspects of living a human life in the world is learning to cope with the fact that we are not always in charge of our own destiny. We cannot make ourselves hold the positions we wish to hold or earn the money we would like to have or make others view us as we wish them to. The culture we live in celebrates self-sufficiency and our fallen human self-centeredness supports this message from the society around us. Christianity does not promise to make these things different but it does, in its Gospel, offer us a response that, if properly understood, ought to serve both as a comfort and a warning. On the one hand, the Gospel teaches, no one and nothing can pull us away from the love of God. On the other hand, our command over ourselves does not extend to our being truly in charge of our own destiny, but it does extend far enough for us to be able to place that destiny in the hands of God.

St. Paul, in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans, is trying to lay out for them some of the most basic convictions that underlie the Christian understanding of the world. The first of these convictions is that, though the world certainly contains a huge variety of trials and tribulations that afflict human beings and cause them to suffer sadness and physical pain and uncertainty, human beings, in the end, are the masters of their own little ships, making their way through the turbulent waters of the world. We are the pilots who direct our vessels in the way in which we want them to go and, while the wind and waves may try to drive us in other directions, if we pay strict attention and keep our wits about us, we have enough control over our lives to manage to end up in the port for which we are headed. This is not a claim that we are able to make our lives anything we want them to be: it is an assertion, rather, that we have complete control over the tone and moral value of the lives we lead.

St. Paul's list of things that cannot separate us from the love of Christ is meant to be comprehensive and universal. It includes political difficulties, natural disasters, spiritual beings, and the past, the present and the future. None of these things can separate us from the love of God because none of these things can alter the moral

quality of the lives we lead. That moral quality comes from inside of us and springs from the intentions of our hearts and the desires of our souls. If we keep ourselves on the right path and only pursue actions that are in tune with the mercy and love that God shows toward us, we will never find ourselves separated from God's love.

This is not a picture of human beings who are little gods in charge of their own little worlds. It is not a picture of human beings who have no need of anything beyond themselves and no need for each other. St. Paul does not wish to make us think that we contain inside ourselves everything we need. What he does intend to do is show us that our moral faults are our own and our moral choices are our own responsibility.

However, once we have made those choices and formed our lives into a coherent shape (for each of us tends to act according to his character throughout this life and so tends to shape a life that is self-consistent and recognizable to those who know us well) we find that we have not solved the mystery of existence and the mystery of our destiny. For that, God alone is responsible.

By pointing all of this teaching toward "the love of God for us which is in Christ", St. Paul is showing us that our ultimate destiny lies in God's hands. This is not a threatening message or a warning of uncertainty; instead, it is a proclamation of great comfort and consolation. The God we worship is one whose character is described in the communion service as one "whose property is always to have mercy". If nothing can separate us from the love of God and if God is a being Who always wishes to act mercifully toward those around Him, then we can be certain that, at the end, we will be received with mercy and treated with love.

The Christian Gospel is a message of consolation and good news, but not because it promises to teach people how to be perfect so they need have no worries. As a matter of fact, the Bible teaches very clearly that none of us is perfect and all of us have faults. However the consolation and good news in the Gospel is found in the character of the God toward Whom we move during our lives. Resting in His arms, surrounded by His merciful forgiveness, we can be certain that the life that awaits us is one that is better than any we have known before. If we can keep in mind the thought that this stems not from our own virtue but from God's own nature we will understand what it means to be able to hold ourselves on course toward that final harbor in life. If we can only keep our vessels headed in the right direction we will certainly reach a safe port at journey's end. In that hope Christians live and because of that hope Christians pray for themselves and for each other. That hope should color our actions and color our thoughts and shape the desires by which we determine our behavior in the world. If only we can hold ourselves steady on the way to God, nothing else will matter.