

Guglielmo Olivotto

Memorial Mass
July 24, 2008
Chapel of St Ignatius
Seattle University
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Today there is a grave marker, like a monument, outside of the military cemetery at Ft. Lawton. It is in the shape of a broken Roman column, the kind you would find in ancient Italy, but broken to poignantly evoke the sense of an honorable life snapped in half. It reads simply in Italian:

“Italian soldier
Guglielmo Olivotto
Oct. 23 1991
August 14 1944”

Before there was this marker, placed most likely by a sympathetic Italian family fifteen or more years after the event, there was simply a wooden cross to mark where the remains of Guglielmo Olivotto were buried and where they remain. Private Olivotto was the Italian prisoner of war who was found lynched at Ft. Lawton, and for whose murder the African-American soldiers whom we honor this weekend were so unjustly tried and convicted and dishonorably discharged and some of whom served time in prison for a crime they did not commit. We honor them and their families this weekend, but we do not forget the man Guglielmo Olivotto whose life and whose tragic death this monument marks. We do not forget him because every life is precious. We do not forget him because he is one like hundreds of thousands of other soldiers who have died and are buried on foreign soil. We do not forget him because he was a man of humble origins—like most soldiers and like the African-American soldiers we honor—a rural laborer, truck driver, a man who worked with his hands. We do not forget him because he died horribly, painfully, disgracefully, brutally by lynching, which ironically was the way many African-Americans in our country died. We do not remember him because he was great or special but because he was not, someone we can all identify with. We remember him—as he may not have been remembered up till now—in a Memorial Mass in his honor in the ritual of his Roman Catholic faith and as much as possible in the language, Italian, that he knew and spoke. We remember him in this religious ceremony in an act of reconciliation, asking God to tie one of the loose threads of war, to reconcile his soul with God, and to reconcile us with our past. So, Guglielmo, this is for you, but it is also for us.

We turn to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures to help us.

“The souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them.”

The soul of Guglielmo Olivotto is indeed in the hand of God and has been since August 14, 1944. No torment touched him after the terrible torment of his last moments. Lynching is a torturing way to die, a cruel, hatred-filled way of killing another. We pity such an end to this shy, introverted, haunted, fearful Italian soldier so far from home and family, a slight-of-build man his fellow Italian soldiers loved and whom they felt needed protection. He may have been the weakest, the most scared among them. He fell into the hands of someone who took advantage of his weakness and fear. We pity his end. How could God not pity and have mercy on him and take him from these last excruciating moments into his hands of mercy, of love, of eternal life?

The other scripture that helps us is that powerful, equally shocking picture of Jesus of Nazareth, similarly hung up, he on a cross, dying slowly a tortured death, exposed to taunt and cruelty, disgraced, humiliated, mocked, afraid, forsaken. This is the Jesus whom Guglielmo the devout Catholic believed in and whose life and message he read in his Italian bible down near the lighthouse at the point of Ft. Lawton. How poignant the similarity of their deaths! And how profoundly reassuring in faith that Jesus reached out to the man hanging next to him who asked to remember him when Jesus came into his Kingdom, and to whom Jesus said “today you will be with me in paradise”. Today. I doubt Guglielmo at the end could have felt any comfort even in his faith. But we can feel comfort, can feel reassured, that he was certainly remembered by Jesus, and taken then to Paradise, to life with Jesus.

Our Mass tonight, this Memorial Mass for “Guglielmo Olivotto, Italian soldier” is a re-enactment, a bringing into the present of the death of Jesus, a death out of love that saves us from despair, the death of the One in whom Guglielmo believed and in whom he placed all of this hope. It is so very, very right that at long last we do this for his sake, and for our sake.