

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

A Man Named John

His name was John Robert McGraham.

Most of his life was unremarkable. He grew up the second youngest of six children in Cypress Park, in Los Angeles. As a little boy, he loved comic books and he'd sometimes run through the house with a towel tied around his neck pretending to be Superman.

When he was in his early 20s, he got a job working at the Biltmore Hotel in LA, and then later was hired as a bellhop at the Ambassador Hotel. But soon, McGraham found himself in a romance that didn't work out. After he broke up with his girlfriend, he became depressed. He began missing work. His depression grew worse. He began disappearing for days at a time, often spending nights on the street.

For a while he lived with his mother, but then returned to the streets, this time for good. His family tried to help him. His sister Susanne said of him, "He just seemed beyond our reach."

Then there was one day John was minding his small corner of Third and Berendo Streets in LA when someone came along, doused him with gasoline, and lit a match. His ragged clothes went up in seconds. And John Robert McGraham became another tragic statistic. He died before he could get medical help. He was 55 years old. To this date, his killer hasn't been caught.

A couple nights later, thousands gathered not far from where McGraham died for an impromptu service to remember him, to grieve for him, to pray for him and let the world know that John Robert McGraham counted for something. They lit candles and expressed outrage that something so brutal had happened to someone so helpless and harmless. Many who were there never knew his name. Most didn't know his story. But he was a familiar fixture in the neighborhood. They could not let his passing go unnoticed.

Put simply: this man mattered.

We all like to think that we matter to someone, somewhere. But during this month's Masses, when we recite the names of those who have died, I wonder how many of those who passed away vanished almost without a trace.

How many of them had no one to attend their funeral, except the funeral director and the driver of the hearse?

How many never had their name known? How many ended up without a holy card being printed, or a picture being published in the paper, or a death notice being filed?

How many people ended up in anonymous graves, in forgotten corners, their stories and their identities known only to God?

On the feast of All Souls, we are asked us to pray for those who have no one else to pray for them—those souls of "all souls" who are somehow lost.

Like John Robert McGraham, they may be, in a sense, homeless. But I think that no one is truly homeless if you have someone to pray for you. Our prayers can be their walls, their floor, their roof, their shelter. Our prayers can offer sanctuary.

And maybe, in some small way, they can help guide some of the departed to their true home. Because every soul matters. When he died, thousands of people turned out to declare that when they raised lit candles for a man named John.

There are countless other Johns out there. Pray for them. Pray with them. Because every soul matters.

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