

Preparing for Death

By David Mills

October 27, 2019 – Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Sirach 35.12-14, 16-18; 2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18; Luke 18.9-14

The picture went viral a couple years ago. A young nun lying in her hospital bed smiling as she died. People posted it with notes calling hers a truly Christian death. This is how faith conquers death, they said. Her death proves that death only brings us closer to Our Lord, that we don't need to fear death, that you can (and should) die as joyfully as the nun. (As it turned out, the picture hadn't been taken as she died, but earlier, though that doesn't change the point.)

Similarly, in today's second reading we hear from Saint Paul, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil threat and will bring me safe to his heavenly kingdom." These words convey a confidence that seems appropriate for a Christian believer who is facing death.

That's the preferred narrative. Saint Pio (among many others) complicates it. His was not nearly so happy a death. As he got closer to death, one of his biographers wrote, "he seemed to doubt he was in a state of grace." He said to one of his fellow friars, "I am the greatest sinner on earth." He even told one, "I'm afraid to meet Christ. I haven't corresponded to his love and to his infinite graces."

Then there's the moment Jesus arrives at his friend Lazarus's grave and cries. And his own anguish in the garden facing certain death. Our Lord himself complicates the narrative.

Grief complicates it as well. My sister died three years ago, the day I'm writing this. As I wrote on *Hour of Our Death* to mark the day, life reconfigures itself, because you can't live in permanent grief, nor deny the blessings you still enjoy, but it does so like a bone imperfectly set. You may board over the hole in your life, but sometimes you fall through it anyway. You wish with that pain that you feel in the middle of your chest that she were here, and not not-here.

A wise and pious friend wrote me in response: "Grief is a funny thing. We aren't consciously aware of the pain, but it's always with us." She'd gone to a baptism and then cried about her four miscarriages for two days, which she hadn't done in a long time. "My husband said to me: 'I thought you had accepted it.' Yes, but love means that our pain never fully heals on this side of eternity. The path of grief doesn't go in a straight line."

The Ideal Death

Every saint is prepared to die. Some die happily, some less so. Death hurts, even though you know death will be overcome. It's the enemy, as Saint Paul says (1 Cor 15.26), and he wins his victories, even if his final defeat is certain.

Ideally and in theory, death for the Christian – and those he leaves behind – ought to feel like a liberation, a promotion, a longed-for meeting with his closest friend and all the people who'd gone before him. For his friends, it should be the thing they always wanted for him and no more than a temporary separation. The saints like Pio and Our Lord and our own experience of grief complicate that narrative, however.

How should we prepare to die? Maybe before answering that question, we need to address the fact that for the most part we simply don't prepare to die.

How We Avoid Death

Here's the problem. Few of us in the affluent West feel death as a real possibility, as the kind of thing we need to plan for. It's hard to think of death when you have so much and when the world demands so much and gives so much 24/7. We budget to save money in case we lose our jobs. We tend not to budget our time in case we lose our lives. We save for retirement, but we don't work for the time we're permanently retired.

Everyone is interested when I tell them that I edit a website on death and dying. Everyone. But not as if I were dealing with something relevant to them, like allergies or investments or fantasy football. They respond as if I were an expert in Indonesian history or the rare animal keeper at the zoo.

Some people begin to think about their death as they get older, when their knees or their hips or their blood sugar or (for men a pressing problem) their prostates remind them their bodies have begun to pack it in. The always aching knee is an intimation of mortality. I'm old enough to know this. But I also know that even then, the obvious inevitability of death doesn't concentrate our minds wonderfully. Others work even harder not to think about it.

Pascal, in his famous passage, explained why. Speaking of misery, he wrote in his *Pensees*:

The only thing which consoles us in our troubles is diversion, and yet it is the greatest trouble of all. For it is chiefly that which prevents us from thinking of ourselves, and which makes us lose [time] imperceptibly. Without it, we should be afflicted with ennui, and this ennui would drive us to seek a more effectual means of escape. But diversion beguiles us, and brings us at last insensibly to our death.

We have the money for such diversions, and we spend it. John Henry Newman described us well: "We are going on right to death; a truism, yet not felt," he wrote in his *Sermon Notes*.

We are on a stream, rushing towards the ocean; every morning we rise nearer to death; every meal we take; every time we see our friends, etc.; nearer the time when we shall lose them. We rise, we work, we eat; all such acts are as milestones. As the clock ticks, we are under sentence of death. The sands of the glass run out; we are executed; we die.

How We Think (Badly) about Death

Still, there's a small fad now for *memento mori*. It's driven, I suspect, as is the rest of American culture, by the baby boomers, now that they (we) have gotten to the age where death is nontrivial possibility. (It attracts young people, too, because death gives them a serious subject in a world they know to be unserious.) This may be true in the Church more than anywhere else, given the average age of our active and most influential members, and the age of those who buy Catholic products. This does some good, but I wonder how much. Because what do boomers want most? Consolation, and consolation in this case comes from approval.

The cut-rate existentialism assumed by most popular culture says: even if (or though) God doesn't exist, you're going to die, and you need to have really lived before then. Some stress being "authentic," others "making a difference."

The current secular, commercial version of this is all the talk about "bucket lists." The items listed could include "I want to reconcile with..." which would be a great thing, but they almost always say "I want to see this" and "I want to do that." I've never seen an article telling you to make a bucket list that explained *why*. So you die having hang-glided off the pyramids while drinking wine you can't afford. You're still dead.

Christians sometimes use death as the last, best argument for coming to Christ or following him better. You may enjoy the world now, but some day you're going to die, and face judgment, and if you lived your life on your terms and for yourself, you're doomed. The milder version is that you will also not be able to undo the damage you did in life, so you must do it now.

If I may say so, priests don't speak of death enough. The typical priest's default position, especially in funeral homilies, is that when you die you make your way straight to heaven. Purgatory is not a living reality, nor a real possibility, in the way most Catholics – the laity as well as their priests – think about death. Hell is even less a possibility, except for Hitler. Catholics priests and laity tend to reject the real possibility of final damnation that makes human life so dramatic, which seems to me anti-human as well as sub-Christian, but that's another subject.

How We Best Prepare to Die

So how do we best prepare for death, in a world and among people who don't really believe they're going to die? That group includes many of us who try to be serious about the whole teaching of the Church. I think and write a lot about death because that's part of how I make my living, and for great tracts of time, I don't think about it at all.

Newman had the answer. At the end of the passage I quoted above, he said: "Seek the Lord therefore; this is the conclusion I come to; this world is nothingness. Seek Him where He can be found, *i.e.* in the Catholic Church. He is here in the same sense in which we are." When it's hard to get people to live their lives as if they will die, we can help them know and love Our Lord better, and become almost by accident the kind of people who will die well.

Seeking Jesus in (and through) the Church means using all the gifts, the tools, the Church gives us. Those gifts train us to die when we don't know we're in training. They include the Mass, supremely, as the act in which we "unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life," as the *Catechism* puts it. Also confession, especially confession as the final act of a serious, daily examination of conscience, of daily prayer and acts of charity.

And all the other gifts the Church gives us, that also help us die to self. Adoration, which brings us face to face with Jesus, whom we will someday meet even more personally. Spiritual reading, especially reflection on the lives on the saints, and the saints' deaths. Observing the fasts as well as the feasts. Giving sacrificially of our time, attention, energy, our money.

These all train us for death. They force us to see how selfish we are, and our need to die to self, and what grace God offers us. As the saying goes, we must die before we die. "The things of this world do not remain always with us. If we do not leave them before we actually die, we all die as empty-handed as we came," Saint Philip Neri said. "We must not be behind time in doing good, for death will not be behind his time," he also said, and, "He who does not go down into hell while he is alive, runs a great risk of going there after he is dead."

These benefit or bless us in this world, which is good in itself. "When we die to something," Fulton Sheen wrote, "something comes alive in us. If we die to self, charity comes alive; if we die to pride, service comes alive; if we die to lust, reverence for personality comes alive; if we die to anger, love comes alive." A blessing I've felt is growing in trust in God, that in him all things will work out. I should not and need not be anxious for tomorrow (Mt 6.25-34), when anxious for tomorrow I always am.

If I Were a Priest

Here I speak as a layman, specifically as a man getting older, who's lost his parents and only sibling and some friends, as the husband of a wife with late stage cancer, and as the father of four children. If I were a priest, I'd try to mention death in every homily. I'd do it usually as an aside, because the priest won't want his people saying, "Oh, yeah, there's Father banging on about death again." Treating it matter-of-factly, as a mundane reality, but one that points us to some things and demands something of us, that would help. People worry that talking about death will be a downer. But the fact that we will die, that it comes to us whatever we do, is the bad news that makes the Good News so obviously good.

But for the most part, I would stress loving Jesus in the practical ways the Church gives us. Encourage people to more frequent communion, to learn to examine their lives and come to confession more often, to adore Jesus in the Tabernacle, to pray a lot more, all those things. Kind of like *The Karate Kid*, in which Mr. Miyagi makes Daniel do chores that turn out to train him for karate.

We don't talk about death enough. I would have been a better Christian, and then when I entered the Church at forty-four a better Catholic, had someone helped me think of what was then the far-off future. I liked hell as a doctrine, especially one that makes human life count, but I didn't feel it as a reality. And when we do talk about it, too much of our talk about death points us only to the end. It asks: What will you be then? Where will you be then? Smoking or nonsmoking, as the joke goes.

But fear is a poor motivator for the long-term project that is the Catholic life, the journey that ends in one of two places. Its effects fade fast. But love moves you and keeps moving you. Love defeats death, just as a purely practical matter. The questions we should ask are: Who are you now? Who do you want to be? Who do you love?

David Mills, former executive editor of First Things, is a senior editor of The Stream, editorial director for Ethika Politika, and columnist for several Catholic publications. He is also the editor of the Hour of Our Death project (www.hourofourdeath.org). The working title of his next book, forthcoming from Sophia Institute Press, is When Catholics Die.

For Further Reading

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church, [##1322-1419](#)*
- *[“Prayers for Death and Dying”](#)*
- *[“Preparing for Death”](#)*
- *[“Saint’s Death”](#)*
- *[“The Maxims and Sayings of St. Philip Neri”](#)*

In Short . . .

- *In theory, death for the Christian ought to feel like a liberation, a longed-for meeting with his closest friend and all the people who’d gone before him.*
- *The saints like Pio and Our Lord and our own experience of grief complicate that narrative, however.*
- *Seeking Jesus in and through the Church means using all the gifts the Church gives us, which train us to die when we don’t know we’re in training.*
- *These gifts force us to see how selfish we are, and our need to die to self, and what grace God offers us.*
- *While fear is a poor motivator for the long-term project that is the Catholic life, love moves you and keeps moving you.*