

# The Death of a Christian—II: Our Personal Approach<sup>1</sup>

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DYING IS NOT AN ACT, BUT THE ATTITUDE OF MIND IN WHICH WE ACCEPT DEATH CAN GIVE IT THE VALUE OF AN ACT

The salutary worth of Christ's death, as we have said, does not lie in the mere biological disintegration of a man who was at the same time God, but rather in the obedient love through which Christ sacrificed himself in absolute attachment to God. Death objectively and factually implies the abandoning of all; a thorough rooting out and dispossessing of self, a passive being-shut-off from without, a loss of proprietary right to self. Death takes everything from us. This precisely is the nature of death as a punishment for sin.

Death is something that happens to us; in itself dying is not an action done by man, let alone the greatest action he does: it is something which overcomes us. Death can therefore only have a positive, Christian and salutary significance when we freely accept this alienation from self, which is a fact, as a positively desired detachment from self for the love of God in union with the dying Christ. In other words, the attitude of mind in which we die gives death the power to take on the value of an act. We must, that is to say, possess the same spirit of sacrifice that inspired Christ when he made the sacrifice of his life (see Phil. 2. 5-11). Only he who loves God above all things, with all his soul and with all his strength, is permitted to enter into heavenly life. Every little remainder of self-love must have disappeared from our heart. Our death can be the great action of love in which the most radical self-detachment is perfected through free acceptance for love of God. Death to a Christian is not therefore something done to him, in which he is merely passive, as if death's salutary worth were a kind of happy chance that falls upon him. On the contrary, the Christ-like acceptance of death is the most important action any Christian has to perform in this life.

First, dying must be a deed of obedient love, an act of adoration.

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*Fiat voluntas tua*, humble acceptance of God's intervention in our life, as and when he wills. Next, death must be an act of perfect contrition: death must develop into the religious experience of a sinner who feels the near approach of the holy God who can be seen only by the 'pure of heart'. Just as Christ in his agony saw in spirit unfolding before him the sins of man, and trembled, much more at the contrast between all that evil and the all-holiness of God than at the death which it was to produce, so also must the dying Christian bemoan with a contrite (crushed to pieces) heart not only his personal past sins, but also all sin and all evil in the world, and 'crying with a loud voice' call for mercy, as did Christ. *Dignum et iustum est*: that which is happening is just and fitting, for I, however holy I may be, see myself in solidarity with all humankind. Third,<sup>2</sup> the adoration of God and loving contrition must grow into a genuine, salutary penance, into the experience of death as the uttermost self-denial for love of God, in union with the death of the Saviour: being emptied of self in union with Christ. Death is our most lonely moment: a dying man is cut off, uprooted, the great solitary who knows time and earth, loved ones and friends, fame, prestige and success, all things and everybody to be slipping away, and who comes at last before the one thing necessary, the One who judges all. 'My God and my all': this is the frame of mind in which a Christian ought to die.

This acceptance of death can be so complete and intense in a Christian that it expels every last vestige of self-love, so that through death his soul without passing through purgatory comes immediately face to face with God. The Greek Fathers teach us that 'to see God' in the beatific vision is conditional upon asceticism and perfect purification from self-love, so that at the moment of the disappearance of the last trace of self-love, the beatific vision wells up spontaneously as if from within, in our very being purified by grace, as if the bursting open of the bubble of self-love made visible the deepest reality of our true 'I', God himself. In this light we can begin to understand the longing of some saints: *cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo*—I long to be released (from this life) and to be with Christ. Death in this spirit becomes a journey to an encounter with Christ: serene acceptance, even though in the midst of bodily torment, of this disclosure of self through which we give our

<sup>2</sup>In these three points no more is intended than to give a brief schematic analysis of what takes place as a single unity in the actual event of death, in the manner of a religious experience, rich in grace and salvation, for a sinner who believes in Christ.

life into God's hands, and hope for salvation from him alone. The Christian experiences the gratuity of redemption most strongly in death: *non ex operibus, sed ex gratia*.

We can now appreciate that to die a truly Christ-like death does not lie within the power of mere humanity: that the cry of sacrificing love uttered in death is not the stammering of our own voice, but the voice of the Spirit of Christ, who, as St Paul says, whispers in us with inexpressible sighs 'Abba, Father', which we in our sacrifice try to emulate. To die is an act of grace: that is, by the power of grace a Christian turns the disintegration of his body into an act of religious sacrifice in union with Christ's redeeming purpose. 'No one has greater love than he who lays down his life'.

#### DAILY PRACTICE IN ACQUIRING THE ATTITUDE OF MIND IN WHICH WE MUST DIE

The spirit in which we ought to die should normally be a condition resulting from our life as a whole, and must therefore be acquired by practice throughout life. This is not merely a kind of scarecrow thought raised up because of the possibility that we might die suddenly. Sudden death is certainly a real possibility, and therefore scripture warns us to be on the watch: *Estote parati*. Still, the spirit of self-detachment which culminates in the free act of love, accepting death, is the constant and fundamental condition for Christian life and not only for the moment of death.

In the first place it remains ever true that even in the case of Christians death, biologically considered, is an 'accident', something absurd that can happen to us at any moment of our life. Death comes 'as a thief in the night' (cf. 1 Thess. 5. 2) says St Paul. As a biological reality death remains something that happens to us blindly. In Christian faith we know that death is not a blind accident, or rather we know that this senseless accident is providentially caught up into God's plan of salvation: God calls the soul to himself. In that instant the eternal lot of man is decided. His life's choice is fixed firm for ever. Some rather platonically-inclined theologians deal with the question as though death were not only a biological cessation but also, naturally considered, a spiritual act in which a man as it were recapitulates his whole life and fixes his fundamental choice for ever. Death itself would then be a human act, having in it an essential element of spiritual activity with the element of biological decline: a sort of spiritual undoing of the complete self by means of and in the collapse of the body. It is extremely

difficult to reconcile this platonic view with sound psychology. It is of faith that with death the earthly pilgrimage (*status viae*) is definitely over, so that no further merit is possible since man has reached his final condition (see Denzinger 457, 464, 493a, 530-531, 693). Nevertheless, the end of the state of pilgrimage does not come about by means of a spiritual act by which a man would sum up his life and in an all-inclusive final decision spontaneously fix his choice one way or the other for ever. If we keep to the objective facts, we must say that the fundamental choice which at the time actually determines a man is made rigidly firm at the moment of death; it is fixed for eternity precisely because of the falling away of his body. Because man can be active and constructive about his own personality only through the body, death naturally speaking puts a stop to everything. The existing life-orientation of a man is snapped off and bound rigid by the biological accident that robs the soul of its 'situated being', and so takes from it all its scope for activity.<sup>3</sup> This means, in the Christian providential view, that a man's attitude of life is stabilized eternally as a result of the intervention of God, who in his wisdom and goodness decides upon the moment of death. This precisely is the profound meaning of the scripture which says: 'death comes as a thief in the night'. God does not ask us about our attitude of mind at the instant of death merely, but rather about our faithfulness to him throughout our life. The past is irreformable: it is impossible for there to be an instant in which we can escape from time and re-establish our past under a new light—not even the instant in which we die. As long as we live, the only light we have is that of our faith and of our existence in the world and in time. There can be no question of an act of recapitulation. Whatever during his life a man has made of the whole of his life, that he is at the moment of his death. It is true indeed that a man, precisely because he is free, can at any moment in his life give it a new fundamental orientation, however difficult it may be to do so. The

<sup>3</sup>The fact that a soul which after death is revived supernaturally in the beatific vision nevertheless remains fixed in its choice in spite of the revival of supernatural activity (in God) that it then enjoys, is due to the fact that the soul rests perfectly content in its final object, God, to whom it holds fast in happy and unloosable possession. For a soul which after death does not immediately possess the vision of God (a soul in purgatory) there is also no possibility of a fundamental new choice, but then within the fixed basic orientation there is still possible a purifying process of spiritual growth: such is the particular significance of the doctrine of purgatory (which we do not now need to examine further).

fundamental choice which a man makes in the perspective of good or evil is not an act made once and for all. Because of his freedom and his ambiguous situation a man can at any time sacrifice his basic religious decision: the fundamental decision of will is on earth never a definitive achievement. It becomes such only by the loss of corporeality: in other words, by death itself as a disintegration. And providentially this means that God himself puts the term to human choice. God intervenes unexpectedly, and the life's choice at which a man has arrived at that moment is by his intervention fixed immovably for ever, as it were from without. Needless to say, in the presence of death Absolute Good makes a more pressing call on the freedom of man than was usually the case during his life. All the more because to die in a state of grace is a special gift of God, God will speak to the personal freedom of a man in the last conscious acts of his life with greater urgency, to enable him if need be to give his life a new orientation. But this is not at all the same thing as a kind of recapitulation of life in the moment of death; it is a possibility that man bears within himself at every moment of his conscious earthly life, but of which he very probably becomes more aware in the hour of death when the relativity of earthly values strikes him more forcefully. The attitude finally achieved is decisive, but this itself depends to a large extent on earlier attitudes which prepare the way for the final one. The significance of this in connection with our salvation lies in the fact that we must live in the realization that at any moment our orientation of life could be eternally decisive. For not we ourselves, but the living God, decide upon the moment in which the concrete attitude in which we are living is to pass over into eternity.

The fundamental orientation in which we establish ourselves throughout our life and which in the awareness of approaching death will very likely become intensified, corrected or even perhaps radically altered, is that very one in which, through our biological break-off, we are fixed for all eternity; it decides us for heaven or for hell. The basic attitude of mind of a man who in spite of weakness and betrayals of trust is nevertheless fundamentally orientated towards God, will, when death overtakes him in this condition, bring him to heaven. Whether or not our death is to be Christ-like and salutary is therefore a question facing us throughout life. Our entire life is given us by God to test our love, as an opportunity to bear witness to our love of God and man and to allow our soul to mature by means of the sacrifice of self-detachment. The essential and inevitable detachment is death. For precisely this

reason Christian ascetism, suffering and sickness, the misery in human life, are all aimed at inviting us to self-detachment, in order that our death might eventually have a positive and Christian meaning and be accepted spontaneously in disinterested, self-forgetful love of God.

In the light of the Christian meaning of death, the sacrifices and the miseries of life become a preparation for a good end. Death, suffering and misery remain always the product of sin, in themselves undesirable, the work of the devil, a curse. And still with a tender and motherly hand God holds this work of destruction in check, and redemptively turns the very work of evil into a bitter yet salutary and necessary medicine. The fact is simply this, that later on we will not be able to see God face to face, if we do not truly love him with all our heart and with all our mind and with all our strength. Such an act of love implies a radical self-forsaking. Experience, however, teaches that an ordinary man, even with grace, does not normally by himself have the strength to carry out this demand for radical self-detachment. For this reason the divine finesse comes to the aid of our weakness through suffering and death. For though God himself did not invent suffering and death, and although it is to be reckoned to the account of sin's sentence of doom, still God from the very beginning has caught up suffering and death in his providence. He converts the very consequences of evil itself into the certain means of salvation, so that we, who would not have the courage to take the initiative in the necessary purifying of our lives can get the purification we need by free acceptance of what in any case it is not possible to avoid. Suffering and death itself becomes thus the supreme loving attention of God who desires the salvation of all men. For this reason many who 'know not the Christ' come eventually to the God of Christians through their anonymously Christian acceptance of suffering and death.

Continuously to work at liberating ourselves from self-love in order to do good is to work at making ours a truly Christ-like death. In this spirit it is then more or less an incidental matter whether we die suddenly, or after a long unconsciousness, or in such disheartening pain that any act of prayer is for the moment made impossible. Death itself is, when all is said and done, not an act. So if the soul on account of pain or unconsciousness in the biological break-down is no longer able to act, the inward, consolidated basic attitude of life remains a fact really present, the soul itself in its acquired personal religious worth, though for the moment it cannot express that worth in any action.

The personality which God then judges is the one that has been built up with the help of grace to a religious worth in all the previous activity of life. *Estote parati*. It is, of course, not true that God in his justice spies upon man to strike him down and make him die at the moment when he has just perhaps committed a mortal sin, nor is it right to think that God in his mercy seeks for the death of a sinner just that moment in which he feels a bit homesick for heaven and begins to be sorry for his evil past. We dare make no judgement about God's predestining love. Every man he calls as he wills and at the moment he freely determines. We do know, however, that God sees the whole man, the person, and therefore especially his basic attitude which can lie deeply hidden under 'sinfulness', for a man in his free power of action can sometimes be hindered by a mass of quite unforeseeable factors, but even so can inwardly desire the good. For many after all sin rather out of weakness than out of wickedness. This does not however prevent the degree of Christ-likeness of our death and therefore of our heavenly holiness from being normally speaking largely in proportion to the degree to which our life itself has been Christian, even though the merciful grace of God can sometimes bring about astonishing conversions in the conscious hour of death.

The thought of death must therefore be an enlightening idea in our lives. Above all, in this spirit, death—not ours but that of our loved ones—will be one of the most salutary detachments we shall experience in preparation for our own death: it makes us realize that here a man passes through the most bitter suffering he can bear, but that at the same time his belonging to God's grace can be experienced most vividly. Very often one sees that the death of a loved member of a Christian family means a powerful surge of divine grace in the family. Though they be crushed—for death remains death, something that should not have been, every loving heart will agree—in spite of the blow they experience more intimately than ever that they are in the hands of God. For the dying Christian this awareness can be so intense that death itself truly becomes for him a peaceful going to sleep in the Lord: like the unnoticed fall of a ripened fruit, he lets himself go and falls into the arms of God.

In life's process of detachment from self, the thought itself of death can be a stimulating factor. Death is like a light that is cast upon the whole of life, throwing the essentials into clear relief against the shadows of all that is of little importance. One can pretend and pantomime all one's life long, but it will very seldom happen that there will be any

pretence in death: then all pantomime is stilled, all mimicry dumb, and with the approach of the end one comes all too often to the knowledge that much of life was but a worthless lie. This is precisely the reason why there must be a vital retention of the thought of death during life. Every moment of our existence must be lived in the spirit that will enable us to sacrifice our life for love of God. 'I die daily' says St Paul (1 Cor. 15. 31) for 'I bear the death-agony of Christ in my members'.

#### CHRISTIAN DEATH AS THE BEGINNING OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL RESURRECTION

The Christian's thought of death is anything but a sombre nightmare. Certainly the sacrifice as such always means self's irretrievable loss of self in the courageous generosity of love. In this, only the crippling disintegration falls certainly within experience. The reward of the sacrifice lies on the far side of its pain, so that faith's certainty of finding self again in God rests purely on a divine gift, and is not to be found accounted for in the biological suffering of death, which as such is experienced as a purposeless destruction. Christian death however gives us a joyful easter promise, thanks to Christ. God's acceptance of the sacrifice of love, the Resurrection, is an intrinsic factor in death, not only for Christ, but for us too. Thanks to Christ again, our death in sacrifice is in principle our resurrection too. The Christian idea of death as a sacrifice is therefore no damper on life, but an enlightenment that situates everything, even the smallest detail, in its true perspective. 'Death is precious', not only to the dying but to the living, too.

In a death accepted in the Christian manner, we see clearly that to die is but the first phase in an eschatological, future-turned, event: it is the loss of self, but only in order that we may receive ourselves more gloriously than before, a pure gift from the hands of God. Death is only the passage to eternal life, the beginning of resurrection. For each one in particular death is already the end of the world, and so is the individual's first step to the return of Christ, for this return means nothing other than the universal resurrection of the body through which the saints will enjoy the perfectly human encounter with the risen, visible, victorious Christ, and those who are damned will also be excluded in a bodily manner from the glorious kingdom of God. That which death deprived us of by disembodiment, our corporeal earthly situatedness and our immediate inter-human relations, is given back in overwhelming abundance as God's gift in the resurrection: in



the 'new heaven and earth' and in the intimacy of reinstated human relations in the communion of saints.

In this eschatological perspective we can appreciate that death is an event concerning not only the individual, but taking place in and concerning the whole kingdom of God. The liturgy for the dead therefore makes the whole company of heaven come down to meet the departed: 'May God's angels lead you to paradise, may God's martyrs meet your coming. May they all receive you into their midst, into the heavenly city'. The eschatological triumphant character of Christian death shows us that the glory of Thabor is a possibility present in every moment of our earthly life.

Christ's glorious transfiguration on Thabor was in a certain sense possible only because during his earthly life he already bore death within his heart and spirit as the loving sacrifice of his life. Whoever lives in this way—with death in his heart: not death the gloomy curse which kills, but death blessed by the sacrifice of the living God—is able to live constantly in the spirit of Thabor, in which there is even place for light-heartedness and joy. For after the last supper just before his death Jesus said to us: 'These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be filled' (John 15. 11). 'To die is gain' (Phil. 1. 21).

#### THE SACRAMENTS AS INCORPORATION IN CHRIST'S RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD

Before we conclude, something must be said about the sacraments. The blessing of Christian death lies in the linking of our death with the death of Christ, so that his life becomes our life in the blessed vision of God, and in eventual resurrection. The linking of our death with Christ's death takes place precisely in the power of the faith we show externally in the sacraments. We take care for the Christ-likeness of our death by anticipation in the sacraments experienced in faith. St Paul says 'there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8. 1). The sacraments already in principle overcome death insofar as it is a curse. For the sacraments incorporate us, not in a dead Christ, but in the risen Christ. In the *memento* for the dead we pray in the mass: 'Be mindful, Lord, of thy servants and handmaids who have gone before us in the sign of faith and who sleep the sleep of peace'. The sign of faith, *signum fidei*, is the patristic term for baptism. Our baptism immerses us in the death of Christ and is therefore a guarantee of Christian death and thus of resurrection, at least for those who live

according to the promises of their baptism. And that which is begun in baptism, which is nourished and strengthened in the eucharist as the sacrificial partaking in the dying and risen Christ, and in particular ways deepened and stressed in all the other sacraments, will at last find its visible and real completion in our bodily death. By the grace of our sacramental life of faith, our death is made Christian. Whatever in Christian death is painful and ugly, full of dread and destruction, is reckoned to the account of our solidarity with sinful humanity: it is the work of man. But the richness and the hope, the living power and the light that shines out of death is the pure work of grace, the consequence of our sacramental encounter with Christ. The sacraments, especially the last anointing and viaticum, are the mediaries through which the living God smiles upon the dying across the last grim sneer of sin, which would like if it could to triumph in this death but instead is literally crushed out in it. 'Death is swallowed up in victory' (1 Cor. 15. 54).

It would be possible to illustrate all the facets of death, as we have examined them above, from the whole of the liturgy for the dying and the dead: the prayers for the dying, the mass of the dead, the funeral service and the burial. The objective stature and the personal experience of death are moreover clearly illustrated in the three crosses on Golgotha. Two men are hanging, one on the left, one on the right of the crucified Christ. Two men rebelling against death and its hopelessness. But one of them struggles around towards the dying Christ . . . and what he sees and realizes is enough to give him complete understanding of his own death.

#### SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH AND THE CEREMONIES OF BURIAL

It should first be pointed out that, because of the Christian importance of death, every man has the right to know when, according to human reckoning, the final moment is approaching, to give him the chance the better to prepare himself. That his doctor or his family should keep the fact from him is pointless. Rightly enough, the information has to be given most tactfully and delicately and after reasonable preparation, but simply to hide the true state of affairs betrays a very sorry appreciation of the power of faith. For the same reason it is un-Christian to delay the last anointing to the last possible moment or leave it until the sick man is unconscious, in order not to frighten him. Not the last moment, but the first real indication that sickness might be fatal is the

time to administer the last anointing: the sufferer has nothing to lose by it—on the contrary.

It may be helpful to say something about the things done around a death-bed and at a funeral. The most important thing is that in these things our faith in the Christian salutary value of death is made obvious. I am not thinking so much of the class distinctions that the world still expresses by the manner in which it deals with the man who in death had appeared naked before his God. This is a problem that can be solved only by considerateness, patience and above all by education. The real point at issue is that whatever the ceremony, an interment must be a witness to Christian faith concerning death. How often does it not happen that the terms in which notification of death or letters of sympathy are couched are merely natural or even heathen? However strongly bitter sorrow is felt—and it always will be felt—the atmosphere surrounding death must still be an expression of the prayerful hope that the living, loving God will take the soul to himself. *Credo in vitam aeternam*. No symbols of despair, no broken pillars, no scythes, no hour-glasses or skulls and crossbones. Are these the symbols of a Christ-like death which is but coming to life in Christ the Saviour? A funeral should be a serenely solemn farewell to a loved one who departs into life. Generous, genuine Christian manners are demanded, not a masquerade. The important thing is the spirit in which the ceremonies and the style of the funeral must be fashioned or accepted. True enough, one cannot brush aside all at once the tyrannous protocol of death imposed by the undertakers. This calls for gradual alteration. But it will be possible only if Christians are more intimately aware of the meaning of death and at the same time feel within themselves more effectually the apostolic urge to call out in the face of the world, and most certainly in the presence of death, life's greatest problem, that we Christians have a clear solution for this problem through our faith in Christ the Redeemer, our faith in the kingdom to come, our faith in Life—the eternal life of God.