

Theology and Meaning of Death in the Catholic Tradition

(The numbers in the following paragraphs refer to the paragraph numbers in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)

Death enters into history

The first man was not only created good, but was also established in friendship with his Creator and in harmony with himself and with the creation around him, in a state that would be surpassed only by the glory of the new creation in Christ. (374) Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. (397) The harmony in which they had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed...Finally, the consequence explicitly foretold for this disobedience will come true: man will "return to the ground," for out of it he was taken. Death makes its entrance into human history. (400) "It is in regard to death that man's condition is most shrouded in doubt." In a sense bodily death is natural, but for faith it is in fact "the wages of sin." For those who die in Christ's grace it is a participation in the death of the Lord, so that they can also share his Resurrection. (1006)

Death is the end of earthly life

Our lives are measured by time, in the course of which we change, grow old and, as with all living beings on earth, death seems like the normal end of life. That aspect of death lends urgency to our lives: remembering our mortality helps us realize that we have only a limited time in which to bring our families to fulfillment... (1007)

Death is the consequence of sin

The Church's magisterium...teaches that death entered the world on account of man's sin. Even though man's nature is mortal, God has destined him not to die. Death was therefore contrary to the plans of God the Creator and entered the world as a consequence of sin. "Bodily death, from which man would have been immune had he not sinned" is thus "the last enemy" of man left to be conquered. (1008) Jesus, the Son of God, freely suffered death for us in complete and free submission to the will of God, his Father. By his death he has conquered death, and so opened the possibility of salvation to all men. (1019)

Death is transformed by Christ

Jesus, the Son of God, also himself suffered the death that is part of the human condition. Yet, despite his anguish as he faced death, he accepted it in an act of complete and free submission to his Father's will. The obedience of Jesus has transformed the curse of death into a blessing. (1009) Because of Christ, Christian death has a positive meaning...What is essentially new about Christian death is this: through Baptism, the Christian has already "died with Christ" sacramentally, in order to live a new life; and if we die in Christ's grace, physical death

completes this “dying with Christ” and so completes our incorporation into him in his redeeming act...(1010) The Christian who unites his own death to that of Jesus views it as a step towards him and an entrance into everlasting life. (1020)

In death, God calls man to himself. Therefore the Christian can experience a desire for death like St. Paul’s: “My desire is to depart and be with Christ.” He can transform his own death into an act of obedience and love towards the Father, after the example of Christ... (1011) Death is the end of man’s earthly pilgrimage, of the time of grace and mercy which God offers him so as to work out his earthly life in keeping with the divine plan, and to decide his ultimate destiny. When “the single course of our earthly life” is completed, we shall not return to other earthly lives: “It is appointed for men to die once.” There is no “reincarnation” after death. (1013)

Preparing ourselves for the hour of our death

The Church encourages us to prepare ourselves for the hour of our death. In the litany of the saints, for instance, she has us pray: “From a sudden and unforeseen death, deliver us, O Lord,” to ask the Mother of God to intercede for us “at the hour of our death” in the *Hail Mary*; and to entrust ourselves to St. Joseph, the patron of a happy death. (1026)

Heaven is perfect communion with God and the saints

By his death and Resurrection, Jesus Christ has “opened” heaven to us. The life of the blessed consists in the full and perfect possession of the fruits of the redemption accomplished by Christ. He makes partners in his heavenly glorification those who have believed in him and remained faithful to his will. Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ. (1026) This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise: “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1027)

Sacraments for the Sick and Dying

The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. This is the purpose of the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. (1421) “Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offence committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion.” (1422) “The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God’s grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship.” (1468) Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our

conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. (1458)

The Church believes and confesses that among the seven sacraments there is one especially intended to strengthen those who are being tried by illness, the Anointing of the Sick. (1511) The Anointing of the Sick “is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.” (1515) The faithful should encourage the sick to call for a priest to receive this sacrament. (1516)

In addition to the Anointing of the Sick, the Church offers those who are about to leave this life the Eucharist as viaticum. Communion in the body and blood of Christ, received at this moment of “passing over” to the Father, has a particular significance and importance. It is the seed of eternal life and the power of resurrection, according to the words of the Lord: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” The sacrament of Christ once dead and now risen, the Eucharist is here the sacrament of passing over from death to life, from this world to the Father. (1524)

Thus, just as the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist form a unity called “the sacraments of Christian initiation,” so too it can be said that Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist as viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life “the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland” or the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage. (1525)

Funerals

The Christian meaning of death is revealed in the light of the Paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ in whom resides our only hope. (1681) For the Christian the day of death inaugurates, at the end of his sacramental life, the fulfillment of his new birth begun at Baptism, the definitive “conformity” to “the image of the Son” conferred by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the participation in the feast of the Kingdom which was anticipated in the Eucharist - even if final purifications are still necessary for him in order to be clothed with the nuptial garment. (1682) The Church who, as Mother, has borne the Christian sacramentally in her womb during his earthly pilgrimage, accompanies him at his journey’s end, in order to surrender him “into the Father’s hands.” She offers to the Father, in Christ, the child of his grace, and she commits to the earth, in hope, the seed of the body that will rise in glory. (1683) The ministry of the Church aims at expressing efficacious communion with *the deceased*, at the participation in that communion of *the community* gathered for the funeral and at the proclamation of eternal life to the community. (1684)

Spirituality of the Those Caring for the Dying

It is becoming increasingly recognized that spirituality plays an important role in caring for the sick and dying. Hospitals are developing extensive Pastoral Care departments while the medical field is formally consulting religious professionals for assistance with their patients' well being. Spirituality in Hospice care did not *begin* to be important; it was always important and in fact part of its essential constitution from the beginning.

When one calls to mind the aspect of spirituality in Hospice care, he normally thinks of the special spiritual needs that the terminally ill patient has. Hospice was founded with a keen awareness of the patient's spiritual dimension and the special spiritual needs that a patient has when preparing for death. It is for this reason that clergy and chaplains are part of the team that provides care for the patient. Nurses, aids, social workers, bereavement counselors, physicians and volunteers who work with Hospice are ever conscious of this need and they too can help the patient to use his spirituality as a help in making the journey through their last weeks and days.

Yet, there is another perspective of spirituality in relation to the sick and terminally ill which can sometimes be ignored. Not only are hospitals beginning to engage pastoral care and spirituality in helping to treat their patients but hospitals themselves were initiated mostly because of spiritual motives and by spiritual people. One needs think only of our familiar St. Landry who founded the first hospital in Paris in 651 or to the many hospitals founded by Moslems in their major cities. We can also remember the many Christian hospitals in our own country such as the Charity Hospitals operated by the Sisters of Charity. What is common among all these is that their work was motivated and sustained by their spirituality.

Hospice too was founded by spiritual people. The early hospices or *xenodochia* from the second to fifth centuries were begun and run by deacons of the Church. St. Christopher Hospice in London founded in 1967 by Cicely Saunders in like fashion began and was sustained by the spirituality of the founders and care givers. Hospice care givers sustain their work by their spiritual lives - their spirituality. It is this that we wish to ponder, albeit with some brevity, by looking at a few aspects of the spirituality of the Hospice care giver.

Pray lest you be put to the test!

Nobody would deny that work with Hospice patients and their families can be most demanding. No matter the capacity in which one assists patients and families the caregiver is called upon to share the struggles of the patient and his family and be a source of solace and comfort to them. This need is met first and foremost not by what the caregiver does but by who the caregiver is. It is the person that is central. It is from the person that patients and family members draw from in their difficulties. Yet, they cannot get from the Hospice volunteer or caregiver what the volunteer or caregiver does not have.

It is thus evident that essential to any real spirituality - but even more so for the spirituality of a

Hospice caregiver - is an active prayer life. This prayer life sustains the person in his work. In short, a real relationship with God is necessary and this relationship is expressed and cultivated by prayer.

A danger of anyone who actively cares for the needs of others is to become so engrossed in the "work" as to gradually neglect prayer and one's own spiritual needs. It is necessary to remain vigilant so as not to give ourselves so completely to others to the neglect of our need for prayer time. In the sixteenth century St. Charles Borromeo spoke similarly to the priests of his diocese: "...do not give yourself to others so completely that you have nothing left for yourself. You have to be mindful of your people without becoming forgetful of yourself." Each caregiver's individual spirituality must be sustained by daily personal prayer. Thus will one's Hospice work be effective and life-giving for patient, family members and the caregiver.

Blessed are the poor in spirit

Spirituality for the Hospice caregiver, or for anyone who devotes much of their time to the caring for others, necessitates a kind of spiritual poverty which is akin to humility. In caring for someone it is necessary to empty oneself of biases, preconceptions, illusions and open to the other. It means becoming capable of recognizing the mystery of the other and treating that person with respect and even awe. This spiritual poverty allows the caregiver to see God's presence in the other and to have room in oneself for what God desires to offer him by the mystery of the patient's person, life and experiences. Henri Nouwen, a man who has devoted a significant part of his life's work to caring for the aged and infirm, affirms that such spiritual poverty is necessary in caring for the elderly: "When care has made us poor by detaching us from the illusion of immortality, we can really become present to the elderly. We can listen to what they say without worrying about how we answer. We can pay attention to what they have to offer without being concerned about what we can give. We can see what they are in themselves without wondering what we can be for them. When we have emptied ourselves of false occupations and preoccupations, we can offer free space to old strangers, where not only bread and wine but also the story of life can be shared."

Thus, the spirituality of the Hospice caregiver should be characterized by a hunger to learn from those he serves. Such spiritual poverty will not only offer patients and family members a safe haven to share their lives but will also move the caregiver into an ever deeper childlike trust in God.

Love is compassionate

Another sustaining element of the spirituality of one who cares for the terminally ill and their families is that of compassion. Compassion is more than just pity or "feeling sorry" for another. The word itself comes from the Latin *cum-passio*, and literally means "with suffering" or "to suffer with." It is a suffering with another in love and because of love. Mother Teresa once said that love is not true unless it hurts. Precisely because one loves, he is pained at the other's misfortunes and is willing to help the one who suffers bear the difficulty, even if it means

suffering himself.

Hospice work demands compassion. Hospice patients and family members are often suffering. Sometimes this is a physical pain and can be treated effectively, but other times it is emotional or spiritual pain and it can be much more difficult to treat. Often the patient and his family are suffering the pain of loss. In such situations the Hospice caregiver becomes a privileged person to show forth compassionate love. Compassion exercised becomes like a healing balm for the patient. Without taking away one's burden and avoiding the "fix-it syndrome", merely sharing lovingly with the other in his difficulty makes that crisis more bearable.

Compassionate love brings spiritual healing to Hospice patients and family members everyday, but additionally it brings its healing effects to the caregiver as well. Compassion makes the caregiver more mature in his love. By giving oneself, that one receives. "In the measure you measure out with, it will be measured back to you." As often has been said about the spiritual life and even human life in general, "When you find yourself about ready to lose what you have, go find someone to give it to." Time and time again care givers and family members have grown by leaps and bounds in caring for a patient or loved one. One family member recently commented after having cared for a dying spouse and then immediately after a dying son: "I would not have traded these years for anything in the world, so dear are these years to me." Hospice of Acadiana's own charter medical director, Dr. Jerome Romagosa, made a similar comment before his death: "Of my 62 years of practice I treasure most my latest years which were spent with Hospice, taking care of the terminally ill."

One thing seems evident, a spirituality without compassion would never find a home in Hospice care and such a spirituality would not be worthy of being called spirituality at all.

Authentic spirituality bears fruit

A Nursing Director at a local nursing home once said: "I am always so happy to see someone from Hospice. They bring sunshine! In fact, I can point them out without an introduction just by their smile." The first fruit of love is joy, as St. Paul tells us in Galatians. Joy is the possession of Love Himself - God in us. It is deep within the soul who loves but, like goodness, diffuses itself about the person.

It has been said that "man discovers himself only in an authentic gift of himself." Hospice care givers are provided a wonderful opportunity to "make a gift of themselves." In doing so generously, joy is the fruit. And this joy, radiant in its beauty and profundity, can be of great solace to Hospice patients and their families. They can find in the Hospice caregiver "the anchor of hope" which is a hope that rests not on human realities but upon God Himself Who is ever drawing the Hospice caregiver, patient and family members to Himself in order to "find rest from life's burdens."

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