

On Death*

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh

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Awareness of the present

Death is the touchstone of our attitude to life. People who are afraid of death are afraid of life. It is impossible not to be afraid of life with all its complexity and dangers if one is afraid of death. This means that to solve the problem of death is not a luxury. If we are afraid of death we will never be prepared to take ultimate risks; we will spend our life in a cowardly, careful and timid manner. It is only if we can face death, make sense of it, determine its place and our place in regard to it that we will be able to live in a fearless way and to the fulness of our ability. Too often we wait until the end of our life to face death, whereas we would have lived quite differently if only we had faced death at the outset.

There is a patristic injunction, constantly repeated over the centuries, that we should be mindful of death throughout our life. But if such a thing is repeated to modern man, who suffers from timidity, and from the loss of faith and experience which prevails in our time, he will think he is called upon to live under the shadow of death, in a condition of gloom, haunted always by the fear that death is on its way and that then there will be no point in having lived. And death, if remembered constantly and deeply, would act as a sword of Damocles for him, suspended over his head by a hair, preventing the enjoyment of life and the fulfilment of it. Such an approach to the saying must be rejected. We need to understand mindfulness of death in its full significance: as an enhancement of life, not a diminution of it.

Most of the time we live as though we were writing a draft for the life which we will live later. We live not in a definitive way, but provisionally, as though preparing for the day when we really will begin to live. We are like people who write a rough draft with the intention of making a fair copy later. But the trouble is that the final version never gets written. Death comes before we have had the time or even generated the desire to

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make a definitive formulation. We always think that it can be done tomorrow: “I will live approximately today. Tomorrow is when I shall act in a definitive way. It is true that things are wrong, but give me time. I will sort them out somehow, or else they will come right of themselves.” Yet we all know that the time never actually comes.

The injunction “be mindful of death” is not a call to live with a sense of terror in the constant awareness that death is to overtake us and that we are to perish utterly with all that we have stood for. It means rather: “be aware of the fact that what you are saying now, doing now, hearing, enduring or receiving now may be the *last* event or experience of your present life.” In which case it must be a crowning, not a defeat; a summit, not a trough. If only we realized whenever confronted with a person that this might be the last moment either of his life or ours, we would be much more intense, more much attentive to the words we speak and the things we do.

There is a Russian children’s story in which a wise man is asked three questions: *What is the most important moment in life? What is the most important action in life? And who is the most important person?* As in all such stories, he seeks everywhere for an answer and finds none. Finally he meets a peasant girl who is surprised that he should even ask: “The most important moment in life is the present—it is the only one we have, for the past is gone, the future not yet here. The most important action in this present is to do the right thing. And the most important person in life is the person who is with you at this present moment and for whom you can either do the right thing or the wrong.” That is precisely what is meant by mindfulness of death.

The value of the present moment may be realized when someone dear to us has a terminal illness and, more particularly, when we are aware that he or she may be dead within minutes. It is then that we recognize the importance of every gesture and action, then that we realize how slight the differences between what we usually consider the great things in life and those which are insignificant. The way we speak, the manner in which we prepare a tray with a cup of tea, the way in which we adjust an uncomfortable cushion become as important as the greatest thing we have ever done. For the humblest action, the simplest word, may be the summing up of a whole relationship, expressing to perfection all the depth of that relationship, all the love, concern and truth that are within it.

If only we could perceive the urgency of every moment in the awareness that it may be the last, our life would change profoundly. The idle words which the Gospel condemns (Matt 12:36), all those statements and actions which are meaningless, ambiguous or destructive — for these there would be no place. Our words and actions would be weighed before they are spoken or performed so that they might be culminating point in life and express the perfection of a relationship, never less.

Only awareness of death will give life this immediacy and depth, will bring life to life, will make it so intense that its totality is summed up in the present moment. Such precisely is the way in which the ascetics fought against mindlessness, lack of attention and carelessness, against all the attitudes which allow us to miss the moment of opportunity, to pass the other person by, not to notice the need. One of the chief things that we are called upon to learn is awareness—awareness of our own self and of the other person’s situation, an awareness that will stand the test of life and death. All life is at every moment an ultimate act.

Fear of death, longing for death

We know from experience, our own and other people's, that we are afraid of death or uncertain about it. To be precise, I think that we are more afraid of the process of dying than of the fact of death. Most people might be ready to accept death if they were sure that death would come as sleep, without an intermediate period of fear and uncertainty.

Indeed, there is even something beguiling and attractive about death. How often people say, "I wish I were dead": it is a way of saying, "I wish I could be free of all responsibility either to myself or God or anyone else, I wish I could return to the condition of my early childhood when there was no need for me to live responsibly and I could simply play." Most of us would prefer to play at living rather than to live committedly. Consequently there is a fascination in death, seen as a liberation from the burden and responsibility of life. But in that sense death must be seen as an adversary, for it is one of the ways in which we are beguiled into turning away from what life offers in terms of a challenge and in terms of relationship. When people say, "I am not afraid of death," we should always be ready to challenge them and ask whether their acceptance or even longing for death does not disguise a fear of life: "I am terrified of life and would like to escape from it at all costs—if only I could go to sleep and never wake up, if only I could leave others to face my responsibilities, all the things which I have left undone or done amiss." We should not be romantic in our attitude to death.

If we look to the saints we discover an altogether different attitude to death. Their love of death was not founded on a fear of life. When St. Paul says, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain [...]. I should like to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better" (Philippians 1:21, 23), he is expressing a completely positive attitude to death. Death appears to him as a gate that will open on to eternity, enabling him to meet face to face the Lord who is all his love and all his life. But this cannot be achieved by wishful thinking. There is more to it than that. In order to be able to long for death in this particular way and to see death as the crowning of our life, as its unfolding to the measureless measure of eternity (to use a paradoxical phrase of St Maximus the Confessor), we must have an experience of eternal life here and now. We must not think of eternal life as something that will come later, as future happiness or future security. The apostles became fearless only when they themselves became—*here and now*—partakers of eternal life. As long as they had not received the witness of Christ's resurrection, as long as they had not received the Spirit, they were still afraid and clung in fear to their temporal life. But the moment they had access to life eternal, their fear of losing temporal life disappeared; for they knew that hatred, persecution and murder could do nothing more than free them from this life's limitations and enable them to enter into the boundless depths of eternal life. And this eternal life was known as a present experience, not only in an act of faith. The same is true of the martyrs. They were ready to die and possessed the sovereign freedom of self-giving because they knew life eternal and had in some measure already entered into it.

Death as an event in daily life

We could learn much about death if we took the trouble to look at our own experience. Death is much closer to us than we imagine, and we all could speak of experiences of

“death” which are in no sense frightening. What I have to say on this subject is neither new nor my own: perhaps more than anything else in my talk it is borrowed from others.

First of all, dying from a practical point of view means to drop out of self-awareness into an oblivion of self. This is something many people are afraid to do. Yet each of us goes to sleep every evening, loses himself completely in sleep, and without any fear. Why? Because we feel certain—to a great extent unjustifiably certain—that we shall wake the next morning. We trust that the next morning will dawn for us, that sleep is a temporary experience. Could we not treat this as a parable of the process by which we die and wake in eternity? For in reality there is a great risk in closing one’s eyes and going to sleep. There is no more dangerous place than one’s bed, as noted in the story of the sailor and the peasant, who were considering the dangers of their respective conditions. The peasant insisted that he would never risk his life on the sea: “It is far too dangerous.” When the sailor asked why he should think so, the peasant replied: “Where did your father die?” “At sea.” “And your grandfather?” “Also at sea.” “And you still can’t see how dangerous it is to go to sea?” But the sailor countered the question with his own: “And where did your father die?” “He died in his bed.” “And his father?” “Also in his bed.” “And yet you dare to go to bed each night?” In this sense we ourselves face death trustfully and confidently each night. And when this kind of temporary death does not come easily to us, we even go so far as to take sleeping pills or nightcaps. Is it not curious that we fail to draw conclusions from the simplest things of life?

There is another way in which the experience of death is familiar to us all. As Romano Guardini has pointed out in his book *The Last Things*, there are several ways of dying in the course of a life. When we move from infancy to childhood, then to youth and adolescence and so to maturity and old age, we imagine that we grow out of one stage into the next. But if we are to develop, a number of things which were previously our condition must die in us: for a youth or adult who preserves the characteristics of his childhood becomes childish, even infantile. In order to acquire maturity at the next stage of development, we must accept that something in us dies. And this dying may be a painful and difficult process, in a way as difficult as the actual dying of our body in the dissolution of death. Many parents know this all too well. They may long for their child to remain a little boy and they may be deeply disturbed at the sight of the young adult emerging out of the youngster. The process of dying in order to live is going on within us all the time: by contrast with such parents we must become aware of it and participate more actively in it. Then shall we be less afraid of death as an irrevocable loss. Rather shall we learn to regard it as an inevitable part of the process by which we grow into a more mature and complete life.

Death to self

Christ calls us to die to ourselves. What does this mean? The phrase is ambiguous, like everything else that is said about death. Does it mean self-destruction? Many imagine that it does, and try to apply it in that sense. Fortunately they fail, but they remain wounded by the terror of it. Properly understood, dying to oneself means acceptance of this progressive dying of things within us, until we come to the point when we realize that there is in us a real and deep self that belongs to eternity, and a superficial self that has to be dissolved. We must let go of the superficial self in order to live fully.

Many feel that they cannot be aware of their own existence unless they assert themselves and demand recognition; and others of course react by trying to defend themselves against this kind of aggression. We can accept *not* to assert ourselves, *not* to impress upon others this awareness that we exist, only if we can believe—and we can believe it only on the strength of experience—that we are loved and affirmed by others. We must learn to be far greater than we are. It is not enough to know that God loves us and affirms us. We need to be affirmed by our neighbour, by at least one person, who says to us, “You matter ultimately to me.” Gabriel Marcel insists in one of his books that to tell a person “I love you” is tantamount to saying “You shall never die,” meaning as it does “You matter to me so ultimately that I will assert you before the face of God, even if no one asserts you but God and myself.” We could achieve a great deal if we were prepared to recognize one another and to say, however tentatively, “Yes, I am prepared to assert you. Although I am not sure how to do it completely, since your existence so far is a challenge, even an aggression, although I am afraid to do so, yet I will assert you as much as I can.” In this way, we could grow to the maturity that will allow us to assert the other and proclaim his ultimate value whatever the cost. The person who is asserted in such a way can forget about himself and live. Such is the line along which we are called to go.

We must have the courage to struggle through layers of fear in asserting one another ever more, fighting fear, yet overcoming it. At every step we have to renounce ourselves so that the other can *be*. As St John the Baptist spoke of himself decreasing in order that the Other might increase (John 3:30), so are we called to die progressively to ourselves that the other, our neighbour, may live. So to die means to leave nothing within us except that which is essential to the fullness of life.

Death as enemy and friend

Yet things are not so simple. It is true that, as St Paul says, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). It is true that to die is not to be divested of temporal life, but to be clothed with eternity. But there is a further point emphasised by St Paul, as also by the rest of Scripture. Man was not created for death; his calling is for eternal life; death is the result of sin in the sense of separation from God, breach with neighbour, loss of contact with man’s real and deeper self. From that point of view, death is the last enemy that shall be destroyed (1 Cor 15:26). Death is the enemy, God’s as much as ours. Indeed, it is God’s enemy in the most striking and dramatic way, for it extends even to Christ himself. But while on the one hand death is such an enemy, the fact that it does reach out to Christ, that it kills him who is perfect man and God himself incarnate, also shows that it is not an evil devoid of meaning. For however much a result of sin and evil death may be, it is not in itself a sin or an evil which necessarily corrupts whoever it touches. Christ was not defiled in his death on the Cross, in his descent into hell, in his partaking of the total tragedy of death: his person was not polluted by communing in its mystery.

So there is an ambiguity here. On the one hand death should not exist, death is the result of evil and is to be defeated. On the other hand death alone enables us to break through the vicious circle of endlessness (and endlessness is something quite different from eternity). If there were no death in a world of sin, evil and corruption, we would

slowly decay and disintegrate without ever being able to escape the horror of such gradual destruction.

There was a soldier in a Russian fable who managed to capture death and put it into a bag. He carried the bag on his back, safely secured, and was regarded at first as a benefactor who had saved mankind from its greatest scourge. But then it became obvious that while death might have gone, illness and old age were as much present as before. And when the soldier one day met an old woman, bent with age and illness, she shook her fist at him and shouted: “Look what you have done, you evil good-for-nothing. You may have captured death, but you have deprived me of my freedom. Here am I, a prisoner of endlessness, part of a process that has no resolution.” The soldier realized what harm he had done and unleashed death. I need hardly add that it is still free and abroad.

Physical and spiritual death

Each Easter midnight and throughout the forty days that follow we sing that Christ is risen, having undone death by death. And yet what do we see? Death free and abroad, people dying as before. It would seem as if we are affirming something that we know to be untrue.

But we should keep in mind that there are two aspects of death. There is physical death, but there is also death, understood as separation from God, as descent into Sheol, the place where God is not, the place of his radical and definitive absence. It is this second aspect of death which is certainly the more cruel and atrocious. When we look at icons of Christ’s harrowing of hell or speak of it in the Apostle’s Creed, we are confronted by something unquestionably real. The Lord experienced not only the first aspect of death, but the second also. He chose to share with us in all the consequences of evil—including the final separation from God (“My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?”). But although he descends to the place where all those who have lost God descend, he brings with him the fullness of the divine presence. Consequently there is now no place left where God is not. And it is this which allows us to understand our situation since Christ’s death and resurrection. We have still to undergo a temporary death, what St Paul describes as a falling asleep (1 Cor 15:6). But there is no longer the death which was the terror of mankind, the final dissolution and separation from God. And in that sense death is indeed undone by death. Even now—however germinally and tentatively—we are the heirs of eternal life.

Facing death

I once went to preach about death at a British university. Afterwards, the chaplain said to me, “Do you know, I have never seen a dead person.” I was utterly amazed that a priest, a man in his fifties moreover, had never met death in his family life or in his priestly function—even during the war. It was an incident that made me take more note of my surroundings, and I realized that there is a very strong feeling here that death is a subject to avoid. The dead person should be committed to the care of the undertakers, while the living should turn away from the problem, and the less said about it the better. I found all this very offensive. Since giving that sermon I have taken every opportunity to speak about preparation for death to medical students, doctors, nurses, and to anyone else who is willing to listen. And I have made the discovery that people are quite ready to think about preparing for the death of others. At the same time very few are prepared to reflect

that their own turn will come, and that preparation for death really begins with assessing death for oneself, taking a stand, and learning how to live well in order to die well—not so much in moral terms as skilfully, in the right way.

Yet we are all of us sick with the terminal disease known as mortality. It may take us some time to die of it, possibly thirty, sixty years or more. But we are all without exception sick with it and there is no doubt but that death will ensue. It follows that preparing for death cannot concern merely the other person or persons in our care, it concerns ourselves.

Freedom from the power of death

How then shall we prepare? From one point of view death has power over us. We were born and we shall die. It is as simple as that. But there is another aspect of death over which we can have some control.

Some years ago one of our parishioners fell ill. He was taken to hospital, where it was discovered that he had inoperable cancer and would die. He was not told about it at first. But his family was, and so was I. When I went to see him his first reaction (as so often is the case) was one of protest and recrimination: “There is so much still to do, and here am I lying in this bed, unable to do a thing. How long is it to be?” I reminded him of something he had often said: “If only I could put a stop to time, if only I could simply *be*.” I reminded him also that as yet he had never made any serious attempt to put a stop to time. Now God had done it for him. Thus he had no reason to complain, nor any reason to feel guilty. The whole thing was beyond his power to change. Yet lying still as he was, with time flowing by on either side of him, he was given the stillness of his present condition. And he could *be* as freely, completely and perfectly as he chose.

When I asked him whether he felt that he was yet in a condition of *being*, he answered, “There is still turmoil within me. I can do nothing, yet I go through the motions in respect of all sorts of things.” I put it to him that illness always confronts us with the things that are ultimate, most obviously with death. In death there are two elements or powers in action. The one power is extrinsic: the germs, the virus, the cancer or whatever it is that seeks to destroy the body. The other consists of all the negative attitudes and feelings that suck away vitality from within: resentment, bitterness, remorse, regrets, lack of peace. I urged him to concentrate on all the power of death that lay within him, and to let the doctors look after the rest.

After that we went through a long process (extending over several months) during which, day by day, he assessed his attitude to those who were closest to him. He had the time to do it; moreover was able to do it in the right spirit, seeing things as they were, not from a pragmatic point of view, but from an absolute angle. In the process he made his peace with all those around him.

Next we went back into his past, moving from one thing to another, seeking to understand his own sense of guilt, to assess what he had done or left undone, what others had done or omitted to do. Gradually all this field was cleared. It took a great deal of courage. For it is by no means easy for a man to look at his own life from the stability of the present moment and to make this moment the beginning of God’s judgement on himself.

Eventually, he reached the point when he was almost transparent, so weak that he could hardly use his hands to bring food to his lips. Yet he said to me, “How extraordinary it is. I am a dying man, there is nothing left of my strength. Yet I have never felt so intensely alive as I feel now.” He had found himself at that point of absolute cogency and stability which was free and independent of whatever might happen to his body.

Only if we free ourselves from all the germs of death which are within us can we reach such a point, where we become aware that we are ultimately immortal, though our bodies die.

It is not too late

When we recall our past as this man did, we sometimes remember someone we have harmed, but who is now long since dead; and it seems as if there is no way of setting things right. Let me give an example. I met a man in his eighties who, nearly sixty years before, when he was an officer in the Russian Civil War, had accidentally shot the girl he loved, a nurse in his unit. For the rest of his life he could never find peace. He told me that he had repented deeply, had confessed and received absolution. But it made no difference: nothing could free him from his sense of guilt. So I said to him, “Why do you turn only to God, to Christ, to a priest to be forgiven? These were not your victims. Turn to the one you killed, to the girl.” He was taken aback. “What do you mean, ‘turn to the girl’? I killed her sixty years ago.” “Indeed you did,” I answered. “For that very reason, when you are at prayer this evening turn to *her* and say, ‘It is sixty years ago now, but I still carry the guilt and reproach of what I did to you. As the victim, you are the only one who has the power to forgive. Forgive me. And ask God to give me an assurance of forgiveness through peace.’” He acted on my suggestion and indeed gained such assurance.

Too often we fail to resolve something in our past because we turn in the wrong direction. If God is not the God of the dead but of the living (Matt 22:33), then all those who have departed this life are alive in him; we, for our part, can turn to them for their intercession and forgiveness. All too frequently people who have lost someone whom they loved feel that they have not loved them as perfectly as they should; that they are indebted to them in terms of love, but that now it is too late to do anything about it. This is a mistake which we should never allow ourselves to make. It is never too late if we truly believe that God is the God of the living. Never should we say that we loved one another in the past tense. The death of the body does not involve a breach in a relationship that was, is and always remains between people who met and loved each other on earth.

The seeds we sow

Death is never the end. The good we have done continues after us and bears fruit in the lives of others. Unfortunately, the corollary is also true: we can also leave a legacy of evil.

On the positive side, consider the effect of the Gospels. There are countless people who have been converted and transformed by reading even a small passage from them. This they gain from what someone, many centuries ago, formulated and wrote down for the sake of Christ. I myself owe my faith to St Mark. If there is anything good that has come out of my life it is because one day, when I was fifteen years of age, I read St Mark’s Gospel and Christ revealed himself and entered into my life.

By contrast, I think of quite other people who have written books, such as the French nineteenth century writer Gobineau. Gobineau wrote some remarkable short stories, but also a miserable little treatise on the inequality of races. It is a treatise that would now be altogether and deservedly forgotten, except for one thing: it was read by Hitler. It is difficult to suppose that Gobineau shares no responsibility before God for all that resulted from his book. He was a theoretician. But his theories became practice, and they were to cost millions of innocent lives.

In this connection, I remember a fable by Krylov. Two individuals were sentenced to hell and placed in neighbouring cauldrons. One was a murderer, the other had merely written some trashy novels. The author took a quick look over the rim of his cauldron to see how the murderer was faring. He himself was being boiled so fiercely that he could not imagine how his neighbour might be treated. To his indignation he saw the murderer basking in tepid water. He summoned the devil on duty and expressed his dissatisfaction: "I merely wrote some novels, and yet you give me such a violent boiling. Whereas this man committed murder and he is relaxing as if that were his bath." "True", said the devil, "but that's no accident, it's deliberate." "How so?" "Well", said the devil, "this man murdered someone in a fit of rage. So we give him a hard boiling every now and again because that's how his rage flared up, then we give him a rest because it subsided. As for you, whenever anyone buys one of your books we stoke up the fire under your cauldron and add extra fuel."

There is a theological point here. Our life does not end conveniently when we die, even on earth. It continues over the centuries through heredity and through the by-products of our existence; and we continue to carry a responsibility for its repercussions. Thus, we have met today; I have spoken; I shall be answerable for anything that you will have received and for the way in which it may affect your life.

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