

Celebrating Death

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The following article by Father Anthony Mellace triggered this memory.

One spring morning a man with his wife came into my Catholic store. The man seemed to be somewhat uneasy or preoccupied. I approached them and asked if I could be of service. The man said that he wanted to purchase a prayer book. As I offered many different prayer books, I asked if he had anything specific in mind. He answered by saying that he had no idea and that he had not been to Mass in over forty years. I asked him what had happened in his life to turn his thoughts to prayer. He said, "I'm dying, nine months ago I was given 6 to 18 months to live. Time is short and I'm in constant pain. Why do you think God gave me cancer?" I answered that I believed God had given him a wonderful gift. "He became a bit upset and said, "God gave me cancer and you call it a gift!" "No, no," I quickly replied, "the cancer is not the gift, The gift is the knowledge that you are going to die. Saint Augustine said that "as we celebrate birth, we should celebrate death. You have time to prepare for your death; so many people are not given that opportunity. You can get your affairs in order and plan your funeral. You have time to tell your loved ones how much that have meant to you; how they have enriched your life. You have time to ask forgiveness of those you have hurt and make amends. You have time

to write your memoirs, to pass on to your family the richness of your life. Most importantly, you can reconcile yourself with God. He must love and want you so very much that he is giving you this opportunity. I believe that everything that happens is providential; perhaps this is why he led you here today.”

The man’s wife slowly drifted from us so that we could continue our discussion. We spoke for about 30 minutes, and as they were leaving he stopped at the door, turned to me and said, “Thank you, Victor.” He never did buy a prayer book and I never saw him again. I prayed that he died a happy death, surrounded by his loving family and in the company of a myriad of angels.

Self-Knowledge of One’s Approaching Death

Father Anthony Mellace

Yesterday, I visited three “terminally ill” patients and anointed them with the Sacrament of the Infirm. Their families confided to me that no one told them of their condition in order not to frighten or upset them. It is not true, however. Ninety per cent of terminally ill patients are well aware of the advancement of the disease that is ending their lives. They themselves know if they are going to live or die. If one receives the revelation that he will soon leave this world it is to be considered in itself a great blessing and rare privilege given from God.

There are two ways to die: instantly or in a slow manner. To die in a quick way (car accident, falling of a roof and breaking one’s neck, shot by a thief, etc) without being in the state of grace is a horrible way to go. It is to end up directly into hell and eternal punishment. No time is given for repentance or a change in life or reception of the sacraments in these dramatic seconds. Of course, this is no problem for those in the state of grace and prepared for death at any moment when she calls, but how many are truly equipped with God’s grace in case they are taken from this life in an instant?

A person who discovers that he only has a few months to live really has been awarded a beautiful grace. He has time to make a good confession, rid himself of all his sins and moral debts and make his peace with God and others. The physical and emotional suffering he will go through can replace and dispense him of a possible future purgatory he might need to pass through. The same pains can also serve to save a host of souls before he enters into eternity. He can even sanctify himself and attain to a great holiness in this short time of purification before he leaves the present world. Our last moments of life should be lived with a wholesome Christian attitude of courage, love, generosity and goodness. As we live and work with dignity in life, so should we also act at the moment of death.

The three terminally ill people that I visited were in a deep depression and sadness. They told me that they did not want to die and wanted to continue being with their children

and families. I prayed with them for their recuperation, health and cure and told them that God’s mercy and power are unlimited and that all is possible for Him. We are all to pray unceasingly and with Faith for our physical recovery and restoration to life. At the same time, our main preoccupation should be with the moral state of our soul, purifying it of all sins and bringing it back into God’s grace and friendship. It is no use to have perfect physical health with a morally dead soul within us. As Jesus said, “do not fear those who can destroy the body, but those who can cast both body and soul into hell”. Our bodies eaten up and destroyed by cancer, bacteria, heart disease, etc and that miserably crumble into dust will one day rise gloriously into incorruptible and shining new ones full of life and immortality, no longer subject to the sufferings they undergo in this life. That is our real hope of the Resurrection. We might as well be realistic. No one is going to live forever in this life and no one should act as if he will. Without being paranoiac, but enjoying life for the time she allots to us, let us complete the mission God has confided to us and when ready to part when He calls, be full of merits and good works.

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