

- (Grottaferrata 1921); a perceptive overview is D. Attwater. 'Andrew Szepticky, Father Metropolitan', *Blackfriars* (February 1948), pp. 53–59.
- 4 P. Mailloux, S.J., *Entre Rome et Moscou: L'Exarque Léonidé Féodoroff*, Brussels, 1966) p. 84.
- 5 T.G. Stavrou and R.L. Nichols (eds.), *Russian Orthodoxy under the Old Régime* (Minneapolis 1978); and more specifically on the attempts at reform, A.A. Bogolepov, 'Church Reform in Russia 1905–1918', *Saint Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 10 (1966), pp. 12–66; J.W. Cunningham, *A Vanquished Hope. The Movement for Church Renewal in Russia 1905–1906* (Crestwood, New York 1981).
- 6 The complete text in *Eastern Churches Review* VII. 1 (1975), pp. 40–65.
- 7 Cited ESA, p. 310.
- 8 On this see H.J. Stehle, *Die Ostpolitik des Vatikans 1917–1975* (Munich 1975), ch. 1.
- 9 Cited ESA, p. 313.
- 10 For a fuller account of the couple's ecumenical activities, on the Catholic side definitely pioneering for their period, see *ibid.*, pp. 336–338.
- 11 Cited P. Mailloux, S.J., *Entre Rome et Moscou: l'Exarque Léonide Féodoroff*, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–102.
- 12 For the wider process, see J. Zatko, *Descent into Darkness. The Destruction of the Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1917–1922* (Notre Dame, Indiana 1965).
- 13 ESA, p. 359.

Death and the Christian

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Attitudes to Death

Someone once said that death is a tragedy only when we know nothing about it. If this is true, then just how much do we know of death that to die would not be a tragedy? If we had some idea what it is like to die, would there be less fear in us? Would we be less scared at the prospect of it since it would not be a plunge into the unknown or a leap into the dark?

What is troubling about the moment of death, thereby causing much distress and anxiety, is that we all know that one day each of us will die; yet there is much uncertainty about death. Consequently, the thought of it grips our whole being, leaving us bewildered. Or could it be the parting with loved ones or perhaps leaving behind an unfinished task which makes death a sad and unwelcome moment? John Keat's poem 'Terror of Death' certainly expresses the tragedy of being separated from loved ones or an uncompleted work. Maybe it is the fact that there is no turning back after—to use Alfred Tennyson's words—one has 'crossed

the bar' that terrifies. Dylan Thomas's advice, therefore, is:

Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.¹

We are afraid that death may reveal our lives to have been a sham and it has rendered us powerless to change them.

Nevertheless, there are some for whom death is welcome. Just as there are varied reasons for fearing it, there appear to be different reasons for welcoming it. To some death will be the longed-for break from life's toils. As Shakespeare puts it:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task has done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages;²

It will be like the respite that one looks forward to after a hard day's work. Then again there will be those for whom death marks the end of an absurd existence, enabling one to slip into oblivion. For these life has had no meaning; what better choice than to cut it short? Others will have a rather stoic attitude towards death. As Caesar in Shakespeare's death play said: 'It seems to me most strange that men should fear seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come.'³ Humans are destined to die; hence, the best that one can do, it is claimed, is to put up with it. Some, like John Donne in his poem 'Death, be not Proud', challenge death and maintain that it does not in fact have the power to kill:

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more: Death, thou shalt die!⁴

Should the fact that Jesus died on the cross make any difference to the way the Christian views death? Christians believe that that same death enables them to see meaning in their own deaths. For them part of the significance of that historical death some 2000 years ago lies in their being able to untangle some of the knots that surround death. Because of that event, death for the Christian is not a plunge into the unknown or a leap into the dark. Christ's own death gives them a reason for hope even if they still acknowledge the ambiguities of the process of dying. Death assumes a meaning which comes from Christ's meritorious death on the cross: the process of dying becomes a participation in Christ's saving act. And because death is made meaningful, then life itself is seen as an important challenge since it is the situation in which the Christian is given all the opportunities of fulfilment at death. It is in this sense that contemporary Christian theology talks of life as 'death in anticipation'.⁵

To regard Christ's death as giving meaning to our own is not, however, to ignore the deep-seated dread of death that Christians share with other people. Death, more than anything else, brings before us the radical finitude of our existence. It threatens to nullify everything. In the document *Gaudium et Spes*, on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II stated that 'it is in the face of death that the riddle of human

existence becomes most acute. Not only is man tormented by pain and by the advancing deterioration of his body, but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction.⁶ There is an instinctive desire in everyone of us to want to live for ever. Hence, we feel restless and anxious as we become painfully aware that, like everything else, we too must pass away. Death is the most tangible expression of human finitude. It is a real threat. No wonder it has been described as *life's sharpest contradiction, the absurd arch-contradiction of existence.*

Death and sin

Theological reflection has interpreted this fundamentally obscure and ambiguous situation of death to be the consequence of original sin, which affects all people and which led to our fall from the gift of immortality. Death in Christian terms is punishment for sin. Humans die because they have sinned. 'Death spread to all men because all men sinned' (Rom 5:12). Schillebeeckx describes death as 'a sentence of doom that man because of his sinfulness called down upon himself and all mankind.'⁷ Since it was sin that brought about death, we have a genuine reason to be afraid of dying. For death may unveil our lives to have been lived in falsehood, thus sealing us off in a monument of folly.

But Christians also believe that the tragic aspect of death is not everything about death because Christ's death has conquered sin. In overcoming sin Christ has won over death, which is the result of sin. What Christ achieved was a victory not in the sense that humans will no longer die, i.e. not that we will no longer undergo physical death, but in the sense that our death has taken on a new meaning. The punishment attached to death because of sin becomes meritorious penance. Schillebeeckx explains: 'So by the fact that Christ as a holy man who is God entered lovingly into it, death has obtained a redemptive worth. Death remains a punishment for and a consequence of sin as a result of which Christ died; but the punishment now becomes reparation, satisfaction and meritorious penance. The punishment is now a constructive, salutary punishment; it receives something that of its own self it could not possess and has got only through God's merciful intervention—a positive saving worth.'⁸ In the same tone Rahner writes: 'What was the manifestation of sin becomes, without its darkness lifted, the manifestation of an assent to the will of the Father which is the negation. By Christ's death his spiritual reality which he possessed from the beginning and actuated in a life which was brought to consummation by his death becomes open to the whole world and is inserted into this whole world in its ground as a permanent determination of a real ontological kind.'⁹ Christ's death has radically altered our own. His acceptance of death has turned a natural phenomenon into a significant one. It has enabled the Christian to reject the claim made by people like Sartre that our death is the absurd last chapter of our absurd book of life. Christ's death gives meaning to our own in that our own deaths

could be the culmination of our daily attempts to turn to God. Instead of being merely the end of our existence, it could be the very occasion of our meeting with God. Death, Christ has shown us, could be looked upon as our final encounter with God.

Christians regard Christ as the fulfilment of all the Father's promises to us. Salvation history sees in him the fullness of God's actions on God's people. All along it was Christ who had been foretold by the prophets of old as the Messiah, the One who would bring redemption to his people. He accomplished this through his death. It was by his death and subsequent resurrection that we are saved. As Paul puts it: 'But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God' (Rom. 5:8—9). Paul saw the death and resurrection of Jesus as the work which freed us from slavery to sin and death and raised us to new life in the Spirit.

But there is another sense in which Christ's death liberates us. According to Christian thinking, Christ's death removes the meaninglessness of our deaths and of our lives. In what sense is it liberating? Perhaps not in the traditional sense, but we should like to suggest that there is a liberating aspect about being given meaning in life. It gives a purpose, a goal to work for. Those of us who have had the experience of grappling with the senselessness-of-it-all, of searching for answers to the existential questionings which inevitably are raised by thinking animals and of discovering some of those answers will know how liberating that last step is. It is more than a passing relief that ones experiences. Human nature, it is said, is to be rational. This can be a blessing as well as a curse: a blessing when our rationality leads us somewhere but a curse when it brings us to a blind alley. There is nothing more pitiful than a serious questioner for whom an answer is fundamentally necessary but who is left with a question mark. He or she is like a clock that continues to tick but has lost its hands, or a person who extends a hand in anticipation of a handshake which never comes. We are not, of course, claiming that it is only the Christian who finds meaning in life or in death. Rather, the death and resurrection of Christ gives us that meaning which, we are suggesting, is liberating.

Death as moment of truth

How are we to understand all this in the context of our reflection on death? Christ's death, it was stated previously, has merited for us the privilege of meeting God. This should not, however, be interpreted in a mechanical sense. Death for the Christian is not merely a passive occurrence—one that we simply expect to happen and then automatically we are saved by reason of Christ's saving act. Death is not just a biological or natural happening, the termination of physical life. It is an activity which involves the whole person. It is also and essentially a personal self-fulfilment. It is an act which we interiorly perform.¹⁰ It is, in short, a very personal experience, something

intrinsic to us.

At the moment of death, a final decision is made—by us. It is ‘the moment of final decision’ in the sense that a man or woman seals off whatever option he or she has made in life. This is the moment when human individuals, realising fully what all along they have been living for, decide wholly in its favour. An irrevocable decision is made because at death human beings become their definitive selves. We have fully decided, we have had our say, we have made ourselves.¹¹ Death removes from us the endless trying to make up our minds, the tentative takings-up of one direction after another. It is only in death that we can finally set the seal on what we wanted to make of ourselves and of our world. In death the fundamental decision which a man or woman has made in regard to God, the world and themselves and which dominated their entire life receives its definitive character.¹² Rahner writes of death that it is ‘active consummation from within brought about by the person himself, a maturing self-realisation which embodies the result of what a man has made of himself during life.’¹³

If death is the moment when someone makes a final decision, then this is the time when he or she exercises freedom to the fullest (‘freedom’ is used in this context in the sense of ‘being able to make up one’s mind’). This is why death ought not to be isolated from life. It is not an escape from life. Rather, it is what life is leading up to. Hence, death sheds meaning on life itself. For if death is the moment of final decision, then life is the process in which human beings ‘make themselves ready; life is their opportunity to prepare for that final and irrevocable decision they have to make at the moment of death. Hence, we can talk of dying from the moment of birth not only in the sense of using up our physical energy but also in the sense of advancing towards our goal. To use a Heideggerian phrase, a man or woman is a being unto death. Life thus is an anticipation of death. Death is the horizon that closes off the future so that all our possibilities can be seen as set out in front of death. Notwithstanding its destructive aspect, death is in one way creative of a unified, responsible selfhood, the concerns of which become ordered in the face of its end.¹⁴ For this reason death becomes the criterion for judging our concerns in life. It exposes the superficiality and triviality of many of the ambitions and aspirations on which people spend their energies. For the fact that death does make clear in a more dramatic fashion the transient character of several of our so-called achievements.¹⁵ It is, as Ladislaus Boros entitled his book on death, the ‘moment of truth.’¹⁶

But to say that we make our decisions at death does not mean that it is only at death that we make a fundamental option. To maintain this is really to belittle life. We know that many times during life we make major decisions. Each of these actualises or brings out explicitly what is in the person, making it part of himself or herself. A decision modifies the being of the individual. But because these decisions are of a temporary nature, they can—as we know from experience—be revoked. The point, however, is that human decisions do tend to build up the person and every decision shapes the human character to some extent. The decisions made during one’s

lifetime contribute to the ultimate decision. Thus, each one of these may be provisional, but it tends towards a goal which will no longer be provisional. Moreover, since physical death can take place any time, any particular decision may lose its temporary quality and assume the form of the definitive decision.¹⁷

Within the Christian context, the decisions one makes in life can participate in Christ's redemptive act because life has been thoroughly transformed by his death on the cross.¹⁸ To the Christian the world as a whole and as the scene of personal human actions has become different from what it would have been if Christ had not died. Genuine possibilities have been opened up for the personal action of humans which would not have existed without that most eventful death. Although that death happened at a given time in the past, it continues to save us at all times so long as the possibilities he has bestowed on us are genuinely appropriated by us. Christ's act is continually being made present so that it happens, not literally or factually but nonetheless truly, over and over again in the experiences of people throughout history.¹⁹ We are saved by our actualising within us those possibilities provided to us by Christ when he died on the cross.

Thus, the Christian, despite experiencing the uneasiness of knowing that he or she must die or that loved ones will die, believes that dying is not really 'a sailing into unknown horizons.' Moreover, the Christian realises that dying may after all be the final affirmation of a life in which one has responded affirmatively to the many invitations Christ has offered us so as to save us.

1 'Do not go gentle into that good night,' lines 18—19.

2 *Cymbeline*, Act IV, Scene 2.)

3 *Julius Caesar*, Act II, Scene 2.

4 lines 13—14.

5 In pointing out that Christ's death gives meaning to our own since it gives us a focus and a participatory role, we are not implying that we should be obsessed with death the way that some people in the past were. Cf. Norman Pittinger, *After Death: Life in God* (SCM, 1980), p. 2.

6 W. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*. 'The Church in the Modern World,' art. 18.

7 E. Schillebeeckx, 'The Death of a Christian,' *Vatican II: The Struggle of Minds and Other Essays* (Dublin: Gill and Son, 1963), p. 68.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

9 Karl Rahner, 'Death,' *Sacramentum Mundi*, p. 61.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Donal Dorr, 'Death,' *The Furrow* (March, 1968), p. 143.

12 Karl Rahner, *op. cit.*

13 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

14 John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (SCM Press, 1971), p. 68.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Ladislav Boros, *The Moment of Truth* (Burns & Oates, 1969).

17 Donal Dorr, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

18 This is poetically expressed by John Donne in 'Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward.'

19 John Macquarrie. *op. cit.*, p. 324.