

Looking Death Straight in the Eye: The Wisdom and Witness of the Saints

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At the Basilica of San Clemente here in Rome, the tomb which lies directly under the high altar contains, according to received tradition, the relics of both St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch. Elsewhere, in the San Clemente complex, there is another tomb or sarcophagus, unknown to the public, whose original place may well have been in the atrium of the Basilica. It now finds its place in the garden of the Irish Dominican *Collegio* adjoining the Basilica.

This tomb, an ancient Roman sarcophagus of grey marble, was re-used in medieval times, around the year 1300, in order to house the remains of a certain Nicolaus Boniseniore.¹ Nicolaus, a lawyer by profession, belonged to a prominent Sieneese family which, in the late thirteenth century, were bankers to the papacy. Why I have chosen to make reference to this particular tomb is because, inscribed across its front in bold letters, is an unusually striking statement concerning death. Nicolaus who was, we are told in the inscription, “distinguished” during his life “by the glory of his knowledge of the law,”² now speaks from the tomb, as it were, stripped of all prestige and glory, his haunting, ghostly words a warning to all those coming after him of the vanity of earthly endeavor.

¹ See “Sarcophagus of Nicolaus Boniseniore,” no.13, in *Mosaics and Wall Paintings in Roman Churches*, vol. 1 of *Early Christian and Medieval Antiquities*, ed. John Osborne and Amanda Claridge (London: Harvey Miller, 1996), 92–93.

² “Sarcophagus of Nicolaus Boniseniore,” 92.

Recognise in me, you who read this how limited are the possibilities of mankind. As I was, what you are, I was Lord of my possibilities. Now I am no more because I am dust and bones. So will you too no longer be the master of your own potential when you will be interred. The fame of the world, honours, prominent position, rank and influence, nobility, strength, pleasure, celebrity, delights and laments, high birth and wisdom, . . . vigour, boldness and intimidation, bruised pride, illness and everything passes except for the love of God. . . . Finally, I was abandoned to wretched death. Then according to the will of Christ I was shut up in this grave. Naked was enough for me, who once could not do without a big house, a wide bed, fine clothes and tableware. Without a bed I am laid naked in this marble tomb. I have no pillow, sheets, mattress or linen. I have no overgarment, not even an undershirt. To die is the destiny of all. Death admits no respect for honour; it spares neither the greatest nor the smallest. There are three things which you should know in order to live correctly: be thankful for death, pious and disdainful of worldly goods.³

Few texts written in the Christian era, or indeed in any era, evoke with such compelling force the sharp, devastating impact of death, the utter and complete loss of so many treasured earthly goods and pleasures, earthly honors, powers, and privileges. But the statement itself, although composed in the Christian era and by a Christian believer—is it in any real sense Christian in spirit? Yes, we do hear sounded, it is true, a few notes of Christian piety, but these are decidedly faint and seem almost to lack conviction. What we don't hear sounded anywhere in the text is the clear note of Christian hope. Although the sarcophagus has obviously been made to serve as a Christian tomb, there survives in the statement of Niccolò an almost pagan perspective on death, a grim and unhappy sense of doom, a stark melancholy. Pagan stone, pagan marble, entombs the Christian voice.

But what is it, we need to ask, that constitutes an authentic Christian understanding of death? My aim in the present paper is, while offering a few general comments on the question, to explore how, over the centuries, death has been viewed and approached by the Christian saints. Three sections comprise the work: (1) Facing Death: The Distinctive Christian Vision; (2) Scandal or Blessing: Christian Grief in the Face of Death; (3) Imagining the Unimaginable: Visions of the Afterlife.

³ "Sarcophagus of Nicolaus Boniseniore," 92–93.

Facing Death: The Distinctive Christian Vision

Four centuries before Christ, around the year 441 BC, the Greek chorus in one of the plays by Sophocles named death as the one reality that finally defeats human beings, and for which there is no answer.⁴ Seconds before that declaration, however, the chorus had sung with pride of the astonishing technological progress achieved so far by human beings, how humanity had managed to tame and master the natural world with the varied sciences and arts of agriculture, sailing, hunting, city-building, language and law. The passage from Sophocles, even in translation, is memorable:

Numberless are the world's wonders, but none
More wonderful than man; the stormgray sea
Yields to his prow, the huge crests bear him high;
Earth, holy and inexhaustible, is graven
With shining furrows where his plows have gone
Year after year, the timeless labour of stallions.

The lightboned birds and beasts that cling to cover,
The lithe fish lighting their reaches of dim water,
All are taken, tamed in the net of his mind;
The lion on the hill, the wild horse windy-maned,
Resign to him; and his blunt yoke has broken
The sultry shoulders of the mountain bull.

Words also, and thought as rapid as air,
He fashions to his good use; statecraft is his,
And his the skill that deflects the arrows of snow,
The spears of winter rain: from every wind
He has made himself secure—from all but one.⁵

Yes indeed, we can say, numberless are the ways which have been devised to help us flee from all that would defeat us as human beings, such as clever, enlightened methods to remove the threat of baffling maladies and diseases. But from one thing in the end, the chorus declares, we are unable to flee.

⁴ See *Antigone*, ode 1, scene 1, in *Sophocles: The Oedipus Cycle*, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Harcourt, 1977), 204.

⁵ *Antigone*, 203–4.

Not one single person of our race, no human being, has ever escaped from “the late wind of death.”⁶

Viewed in the light of these declarations what Christianity proclaims is truly remarkable, namely that there is, in fact, “a cure for death,” and that the “cure” is nothing other than the grace and power of Christ Jesus. Words, statements made by Christ regarding death in St. John’s Gospel, are overwhelmingly powerful, astounding in fact, in the hope they offer humanity: “I am the resurrection and the life”; “Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die,” (John 11:25–26). *Will never die*. That saving truth, the fact that for believers in Christ natural death is not the end of life but a door that opens wide into eternity, is a revelation which transformed the lives and transformed the ways of thinking of the early Christians. After death, St. Paul made bold to declare: “We will be raised imperishable. . . . Then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’” (1 Cor 15:54–55).

What follows most immediately—the first part of the present paper—is a reflection on the witness of three saints, two from the early Church and one from modern times: Ignatius of Antioch, Ambrose of Milan, and Thérèse of Lisieux.

St. Ignatius of Antioch: Facing Martyrdom

A considerable number of saints and martyrs in the early Church dared with a confidence to match that of St. Paul to look death straight in the eye, but none, I would say, with more courage and more boldness of spirit than Ignatius of Antioch. Some of the letters which Ignatius wrote to the different churches were composed when he was being brought in chains from Syria to be martyred at Rome. The most celebrated of these letters by far is one addressed to the Christians at Rome. Ignatius regards the threat of martyrdom as a unique opportunity to bear witness to the supreme reality of God. And so, he appeals to the Christians in Rome not to intervene to prevent his martyrdom. “By staying silent,” he declares, “and letting me alone, you can turn me into an intelligible utterance of God; but if your affections are only concerned with my poor human life, then I become a meaningless cry once more.”⁷

Ignatius does not disdain life, far from it. But he is persuaded that the suffering of martyrdom, the anguish it entails, will have an impact on his

⁶ *Antigone*, 204.

⁷ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Romans*, in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin, 1975), 103–4.

life like birth pangs, and bring to birth such an inner transformation he will become his truest and most authentic self:

The pangs of birth are upon me; have patience with me, my brothers, and do not shut me out from life, do not wish me to be stillborn. Here is one who only longs to be God's; do not make me a present of him to the world again or delude him with the things of earth. Suffer me to attain to light, light pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the Passion of my God. If any of you has God within himself, let that man understand my longings, and feel for me because he will know the forces by which I am constrained.⁸

Though Ignatius's gaze is clearly focused on the death that awaits him, his attention is even more focused on Christ his risen Brother and Lord for whom he wishes to become "a libation poured out to God."⁹ Instead, therefore, of being overcome by fear at the thought—the horrendous thought—of being eaten alive by lions in the Coliseum or wherever, Ignatius declares with unspeakable trust and faith: "I am His wheat, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread for Christ."¹⁰

This extraordinary statement, this cry of desire in the letter, and other statements like it, sent a thrill of wonder throughout the Christian world. What would otherwise have appeared unpalatable from every point of view—a cruel, meaningless, and absurd death—was, as a result of Ignatius's trust in the power and grace of Christ, transformed into a wholly unexpected kind of aid and sustenance, a bread of hope and meaning: *I am His wheat, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread for Christ.*

St. Ambrose of Milan: On Death as Liberation

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the impact made on the early Church by the death of martyrs such as Ignatius. Writing, a few centuries later, St. Ambrose of Milan declares: "By the death of martyrs religion has been defended, faith increased, the Church strengthened, the dead have conquered, the persecutors have been overcome."¹¹ The actual theme of death is one to which Ambrose devoted a huge amount of attention. In fact, of all

⁸ Ign. *Rom.*, 105–6.

⁹ Ign. *Rom.*, 104.

¹⁰ Ign. *Rom.*, 104.

¹¹ St. Ambrose, *On the Death of Satyrus* 2.45, in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, ser. 2, vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 180.

the Western Fathers of the Church, no one more than Ambrose, I would say, explores the theme of death with such decided focus and intensity. In the great bishop's understanding, the sacrificial death of Christ on Calvary changed everything. In virtue of that one sacrifice, death has acquired, Ambrose believes, a completely new meaning:

When we offer the Sacrifice, we declare his death, for his death is victory, his death is our mystery, his death is the yearly recurring solemnity of the world. What now should we say concerning his death, since we prove by this divine example that death alone found immortality, and that death itself redeemed itself. Death, then, is not to be mourned over for it is the cause of salvation for all; death is not to be shunned, for the Son of God did not think it unworthy of him and did not shun it.¹²

Far from avoiding, therefore, the thought of death, Ambrose suggests that we should actually strive to embrace it. We should, in fact, have nothing less than a daily familiarity with death. Death is not something to dread. In the final treatise Ambrose wrote on the subject before his own death, *De bono mortis*,¹³ he writes: "The Apostle [Paul] teaches us that we must embrace Christ's death while we are still alive in this world so that the splendour of his death may shine out in our body."¹⁴ Later, in the same treatise, Ambrose writes:

Death in this sense is a pilgrimage, a lifetime's pilgrimage [from] which none must shirk, a pilgrimage from decay to imperishable life, from mortality to immortality, from anxiety to unruffled calm. Do not be afraid of the word death: rather rejoice in the blessings which follow a happy death. What is death after all but the burial of vice, the flowering of goodness? Hence the words of scripture, "Let my soul die in the souls of the just," that is, let it be buried with them and so slough

¹² St. Ambrose, *On the Death of Satyrus* 2.46 (p. 181).

¹³ St. Ambrose's *De bono mortis* can be found in *PL*, 14:384–596.

¹⁴ *De bono mortis* 3, 9. For translation, see "A Reading from the Treatise of St. Ambrose, *On the Blessing of Death*," Second Reading for Saturday Week 31, *The Divine Office*, 3:733. For an alternative translation, see *S. Ambrosii De bono mortis: A Revised Text with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, trans. and ed. William Theodore Wiesner (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1970), 97.

off its own vice and be clothed in the grace of the saints who carry around the mortification of Christ in their own bodies and souls.¹⁵

What Ambrose is referring to there at the end is the ordinary, hallowed practice of Christian asceticism. And it is clear from what he is saying that a living and necessary part of that practice involves, at every stage of our lives as believers, looking death straight in the eye.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux: On Fear and Death

In the last month of her life St. Thérèse of Lisieux remarked to one of her sisters, "I fear I've been afraid of death."¹⁶ By any ordinary standards, the statement is in no way unusual. But coming directly after declarations from St. Ambrose such as "Death is not, then, an object of dread"¹⁷ and "There is, then, nothing for us to fear in death,"¹⁸ Thérèse's confession of fear invites reflection. Perhaps the most important thing to note is that Christ himself, having assumed the human condition in its totality, experienced dread before his own death in the Garden at Gethsemane. As human beings, we all naturally abhor the process of dying. Even though as believers in Christ we trust that, after death, we will more than ever be united with God, that "mystical hope . . . can coexist with a natural fear of death." This statement was made in a document on death produced in 1992 by the International Theological Commission at the Vatican.¹⁹ The document goes on to point out that the coexistence of these two states is a phenomenon which "appears again and again in the spiritual tradition of the Church, especially among the saints."²⁰ Dying for most of us will very possibly, even probably, be a bewildering, messy affair, but that should not rob the average believer of the tremendous hope of final union with God, that graced, that bold conviction, so powerfully expressed by both Ignatius of Antioch and Ambrose of Milan.

In the case of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a childlike trust in that hope would prove to be unconquerable. Nevertheless, not for a second does Thérèse ignore or deny the fierce anguish and humiliation of the dying process. "What would become of me," she exclaims at one point, "if God did not give

¹⁵ *De bono mortis* 5.15 (*Divine Office*, 3:733–34).

¹⁶ *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, September 11, 1897, trans. John Clarke (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1977), 188.

¹⁷ St. Ambrose, *On the Death of Satyrus* 2.44 (p. 180).

¹⁸ St. Ambrose, *On the Death of Satyrus* 2.49 (p. 181).

¹⁹ International Theological Commission (ITC), *Some Current Questions in Eschatology* (1992), §6.2.

²⁰ ITC, *Some Current Questions in Eschatology*, §6.2.

me courage?" And she adds: "A person does not know what this is unless he experiences it. . . . Yes! What a grace it is to have faith! If I had not had any faith, I would have committed suicide without an instant's hesitation!"²¹ During the final weeks of her life, a number of conversations between Thérèse and some of her sisters were written down. One of them was on the subject of fear and death:

Mother Agnes: "Are you afraid now that death is so close?"

Thérèse: "Ah! Less and less!"

Mother Agnes: "Do you not fear the Thief? This time he is at the door!"

Thérèse: "No. he is not at the door; He has entered. But what are you saying, little Mother, how can I fear one whom I love?"²²

Thérèse died on September 30, 1897. Earlier that year she made a number of sharp, memorable comments on the process of dying. First, in the month of June, she remarked: "Don't be troubled, little sisters, if I suffer very much and if you see in me . . . no sign of happiness at the moment of death. Our Lord really died as a Victim of Love, and you see what His agony was!"²³ In similar vein, in the month of July, she remarked: "Our Lord died on the Cross in anguish, and yet His was the most beautiful death of love. To die of love does not mean to die of transports."²⁴

Toward the end, Thérèse underwent unbelievable agony. "Oh, it's pure suffering," she exclaimed on September 30, "because there are no consolations! No, not one! . . . Yes, my God, everything that you will! . . . But, have pity on me! I can't take anymore! I can't take any more! And yet I must endure. . . . Tomorrow, it will be worse! Well, so much the better!"²⁵

At the very end a death rattle tore her chest for more than two hours. It was becoming, Mother Agnes reports, more than ever difficult for her to breathe. But, at the very end, Thérèse, gazing down at her crucifix, pronounced very distinctly "Oh! I love him!" Then, moments later: "My God, I love you!"²⁶ She looked up to a spot just above the statue of the Blessed

²¹ *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, 196.

²² See epilogue of *Thérèse of Lisieux: Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clarke (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1996), 262–63.

²³ *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, 56.

²⁴ *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, 73.

²⁵ *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, 243.

²⁶ *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, 243.

Virgin. She appeared to be in an ecstasy. That lasted for the space of a Credo. Then, finally, she closed her eyes and died. Two weeks earlier (September 15), Thérèse, commenting on the sorry state of her health, had remarked: "Yes, I'm like a tired and harassed traveller, who reaches the end of his journey and falls over. Yes, but I'll be falling into God's arms!"²⁷

Scandal or Blessing: Christian Grief in the Face of Death

Should Christian believers be grief-stricken at the death of the people they most treasure, most love? Or should they, relying on faith, be more joyful than sad, taking comfort in the knowledge that death opens the door into eternity, and that a life much greater than the present life has begun? Here is what St. Ambrose of Milan wrote on the subject of death and grief, words of great conviction:

We deem that death is not to be mourned over; firstly, because it is common and due to all; next because it frees us from the miseries of this life and, lastly, because when, in the likeness of sleep, we are at rest from the toils of this world, a more lively vigour is shed upon us. What grief is there which the grace of the resurrection does not console? What sorrow is not excluded by the belief that nothing perishes in death? Nay, indeed, that by the hastening of death it comes to pass that much is preserved from perishing.²⁸

Two other doctors of the Church, St. John Chrysostom of the fourth century and St. Bernard of Clairvaux of the twelfth, have reflected memorably on the subject of Christian grief. Scarcity of time compels me to limit my consideration of the topic to one sermon by Chrysostom, "On the Consolation of Death," and one sermon by Bernard, Sermon 26 in his commentary on Song of Songs. What is immediately striking is that, on the topic of grief, these two great doctors, although they seem at the beginning to aspire to the same ideal, in the end appear radically to disagree with one another. How are we to understand this seeming difference in their two approaches?

²⁷ St. Thérèse of Lisieux: *Her Last Conversations*, 191.

²⁸ St. Ambrose, *On the Death of Satyrus* 2.3 (p. 174).

St. John Chrysostom: On Keeping Grief in Check

Chrysostom begins his sermon speaking of the sorrow of King David in the Second Book of Samuel. The king is sad, Chrysostom notes, “because he sees his beloved son, whom he loved as his own soul, lying ill.”²⁹ Dressed in sackcloth, David fasts for seven days, pleading with God to let his son live, but in the end the boy dies. What happens then is astonishing. According to Chrysostom: “David immediately rises from the ground, lays down his sackcloth, and is as joyful as if he had received the news that his son had been made well.”³⁰ His friends cannot understand this behavior and ask him why he is not overwhelmed with sorrow at the death of his beloved son. David replies: “When my son was still alive, I humbled myself and fasted and was sad before the face of the Lord, for there was still the hope of receiving a longer life for my son. But after the will of the Lord had been done, it would be foolish and an insult to God if I myself still weighed down the heart with unnecessary sorrow.”³¹

St. John Chrysostom, commenting on this response of David to his son’s death, remarks: “Behold, what an example of greatness and virtue! David, who was still under the law, . . . nevertheless had so much control over his grief that he kept his grief in check.”³² Then, turning to address his Christian congregation, Chrysostom exclaims: “With what kind of neck do we who live under grace, who have the sure hope of the resurrection, who are forbidden to mourn, with what kind of neck do we weep for our dead like the pagans, raising unrestrained howls? . . . And why do we wear black garments at this time, as if we wanted to show not only by our lamentations but also by our garments that we are wretched and unbelievers?”³³

St. Bernard of Clairvaux: Grief at the Death of His Brother

St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermon also opens with a reflection on a text from the Old Testament, but in this case, it is a text, a verse, from chapter 1 of Song of Songs. Some days earlier, Bernard’s beloved brother, Gerard, had died. An actual blood-brother to Bernard, Gerard was also one of his monks. He was a practical man and, over the years, had proved to be of invaluable help to Bernard. Also, he was greatly loved by all the community. When he died, many monks, we are told, wept for him. Bernard alone did not weep, being

²⁹ St. John Chrysostom, Sermon 11 (*De consolatio mortis*), no. 6 (*PG*, 6:302–3); trans. Fr. Enda Murphy.

³⁰ Chrysostom, Sermon 11, no. 6.

³¹ Chrysostom, Sermon 11, no. 6.

³² Chrysostom, Sermon 11, no. 6.

³³ Chrysostom, Sermon 11, no. 6.

determined as abbot, in spite of the strength of his feelings, to manifest a firm faith in the reality of eternal life and, in that way, offer good example to his monks. But, in his talk to the community, Bernard had scarcely managed to share a reflection or two on the text of Song of Songs when the feelings which he had suppressed up to now suddenly erupted. "How long shall I keep my pretence while a hidden fire burns my sad heart, consumes me from within? A concealed fire creeps forward with full play, it rages more fiercely."³⁴ Then there occurs a veritable explosion of emotion:

I, whose life is bitterness, what have I to do with this canticle? [*Quid mihi et cantico huic?*] . . . I have done violence to myself and kept up a pretence, lest my affection should seem stronger than my faith. While others wept, I, as you could not but see, followed with dry eyes at the graveside till the last solemn rite was performed. . . . With my own hands I cast the clay over the body of him I loved. . . . The eyes that beheld me were filled with tears, and the wonder was that I did not weep, since all took pity . . . at seeing me there living on without my Gerard. . . . With all the force of faith that I could muster I resisted my feelings, striving, against my will. . . . But the sorrow that I suppressed struck deeper roots within, growing all the more bitter, I realized, because it found no outlet. I confess, I am beaten. . . . You, my sons, know how deep my sorrow is, how galling the wound it leaves. . . . Who was ever so necessary to me? Who ever loved me as he? My brother by blood, but bound to me more intimately by religious profession. . . . I was frail in body and he sustained me, faint of heart and he gave me courage. . . . Why has he been torn from me? Why snatched from my embraces, a man of one mind with me, a man according to my heart? We loved each other in life, how can it be that death separates us? And how bitter the separation that only death could bring about? While you lived when did you ever abandon me? It is totally death's doing, so terrible a parting. . . . In every emergency I look to Gerard for help, as I always did, and he is not there. . . . What was for him the gateway to life is simply death to me; for by that death it is I who have died, not he; he has but gone to sleep in the Lord. Flow on, flow on, my tears, so long on the point of brimming over; flow on. . . . Let the floodgates of my wretched head be opened, let my tears gush forth like fountains. . . . It is Gerard whom I weep for,

³⁴ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 26, no. 3, in *On the Song of Songs*, vol. 2, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1976), 60.

Gerard is the reason for my weeping, my brother by blood, but closer by an intimate spiritual bond, the one who shared all my plans. . . . My very heart is torn from me and shall it be said to me, "Try not to feel it"? But I do feel it intensely in spite of myself. . . . I have made public the depth of my affliction, I make no attempt to deny it. Will you say then that this is carnal? That it is human, yes, since I am a man. If this does not satisfy you then I am carnal. . . . I am certainly not insensible to pain: to think that I shall die, that those who are mine shall die, will die, fills me with dread. And Gerard was mine, so utterly mine; . . . it is he who has gone from me. I feel it, the wound is deep.³⁵

The memory of how Gerard actually died is, at this point, recalled by Bernard and he is moved at once to address the spirit of his brother:

In the middle of your last night on earth, . . . to the astonishment of those about you, you burst into that hymn of David, "Let heaven praise the Lord, praise him in the heights." Even then, for you, dear brother, the midnight dark was yielding to the dawn, the night was going bright like the day. . . . O Gerard, though my mourning is not for you, it is because of you. My deepest wound is in the ardour of my love for you. And let no one embarrass me by telling me I am wrong in yielding to this feeling.³⁶

The fact that Christ himself was stricken with grief comes to Bernard's mind all of a sudden, and it serves at once as a source of encouragement. "At the tomb of Lazarus," he writes, "Christ neither rebuked those who wept nor forbade them to weep, rather he wept with those who wept. The Scripture says: 'And Jesus wept.' These tears were witness to his human kindness, not signs that he lacked trust. . . . In the same way our weeping is not a sign of a lack of faith, it indicates the human condition."³⁷ Bernard then turns and addresses God directly with these words: "You gave me Gerard, you took him away: and if his removal makes me sad, I do not forget that he was given to me and offer thanks for my good fortune in having had him."³⁸

The response of Bernard to the death of his brother I find not only profoundly moving as a human testament to grief but also exemplary in its Christian witness. What immediately strikes the contemporary reader who

³⁵ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 26, nos. 3–10 (pp. 60–69).

³⁶ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 26, no. 10 (p. 70).

³⁷ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 26, no. 12 (p. 72).

³⁸ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 26, no. 13 (p. 73).

happens, for the first time, upon this particular sermon is that the things Bernard says about the importance of not suppressing the deep and raw feelings of human grief prefigure, in quite stunning ways, things which have been explored and established or re-established more recently by modern depth psychology.

That being said, what judgment can we make about the sermon of Chrysostom? Its core message, its insistence on the suppression of heartfelt feelings of grief—is it a message so completely lacking in human understanding, a message so harsh and inhuman in its judgment, as to be positively dangerous? The majority of most readers today would most probably come to that conclusion. And I confess I lean in that direction. The extremism of Chrysostom's language should not, however, blind us to something of enormous importance which the golden-tongued doctor is here urgently trying to express, a belief, a conviction, that death has indeed been conquered, and that our hope, therefore, is great for all those who have died, those whom we have loved and treasured greatly in this life. Though Chrysostom clearly pushes to an extreme the point he wants to make, the faith-vision behind his words is a noble and redemptive vision. Chrysostom, as a preacher, wants believers never to forget, even when oppressed and beset by grief, that to a sad, death-haunted world Christ has brought final freedom from the thrall of death.

What I find truly impressive about St. Bernard's homily is that, far from speaking in the unhappy mode of an unbeliever and grieving, therefore, as if death marked the end of human life, the saint of Clairvaux, in spite of his enormous sorrow, clearly believes that his brother has entered into a realm of wondrous light and joy. That explains why Bernard can exclaim to the brother whom he has lost, "Would that one day however far off, I may follow you wherever you go!" He adds: "One cannot doubt but that you have gone to those whom you invited to sing God's praise in the middle of your last night on earth."³⁹ At this point Bernard recalls: "I was summoned to witness this miracle, to see a man exulting in the hour of death and mocking its onset. 'O death, where is your victory?' A sting no longer but a shout of joy. A man dies while he sings, he sings by dying."⁴⁰ Bernard then turns and addresses Death itself with these strong, radiant words: "Gerard had no fear of you, shadowy phantom that you are. Gerard passes on to his fatherland through your jaws, not only secure but filled with overflowing joy."⁴¹

³⁹ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 26, no. 11 (p. 70).

⁴⁰ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 26, no. 11 (p. 70).

⁴¹ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 26, no. 11 (p. 71).

Imagining the Unimaginable: Visions of the Afterlife

Because the saints and martyrs of the Church have a positive vision of what awaits them beyond the grave, they are able not only to look death in the eye, but are able with manifest hope and confidence to look through it as it were, their confidence based on the one or two images revealed by Christ concerning the afterlife—heaven, in other words, as a place of many mansions, a place where Christ waits to welcome us. These images are helpful in making concrete the believers' conviction about the world to come. But, with regard to heaven itself, we read in the New Testament, "Eye has not seen nor ear heard . . . the things God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9)—a statement highlighting the near impossibility of describing what heaven will be like for those found worthy to enter into that eternal state of joy. Not surprisingly, questions, challenging questions, arose in the minds of the early Christians concerning the likely experience of that blessed state. What kind of body, for example, will the saints possess in heaven, in their new resurrected life? This question St. Paul answered by indicating that our present bodies will have to undergo a wondrous change: "This perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Cor 15:53). The spiritual body in heaven will still, of course, be a physical body, even though it will be one which transcends the limitations of space and time. The saints in glory, it is worth noting, are not disembodied angels. On the contrary, they are alive, we can say, in a transfigured state of physicality.

Aquinas: On the Resurrected Body

So wondrous, so mysterious are the realities of the afterlife and so challenging for our minds to contemplate, it might seem wise to set all such speculations aside. But that was not the decision made by theologians in the Middle Ages, Aquinas among them. These dogged thinkers, these undaunted contemplatives, made bold to put forward ideas and images suggestive of the form which the body would assume in its glorified state. Here, I am referring, of course, to the four dowries or gifts, *dotes* of the glorified body. Aquinas speaks of these *dotes* in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, and in other works as well.⁴² But what I find particularly worthy of note are the references we find made to them in the prayer attributed to St. Thomas, *Te Deum totius*

⁴² See Thomas Aquinas, *In III sent.*, d. 16, q. 2, a. 2; d. 21, q. 2, a. 3, ad 5; *Super I Cor* 15, lec. 6; *Summa contra gentiles* IV, ch. 86; *Compendium theologiae* I, ch.168.

consolationis, known in English as “Prayer for the Attainment of Heaven.”⁴³ (As it happens, there exists evidence, both internal and external, to suggest that St. Thomas really is the author of this particular prayer.)⁴⁴

The first thing our Dominican author, most probably Thomas, asks is that he might possess in heaven an intimate and profound knowledge of God, “the first Truth.” But then he goes on at once to ask that the body likewise would be transformed by grace.

Give to my body also
the splendour of *claritas*,
the promptitude of *agilitas*,
the penetration of *subtilitas*,
and the strength of *impassibilitas*.⁴⁵

The *claritas* of the transfigured body will mark a clear fulfillment of the promise made in The Book of Wisdom 3:7—“The virtuous will shine and will run to and fro like sparks among the stubble,”—and of the promise made in Matthew 13:43: “The virtuous will shine as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” Owing to the overflow of glory from the soul into the resurrected body, there will be no strain or labor in the movements of the saints; a new-found *agilitas* will enable them to travel vast distances at the speed of thought. The third gift, that of *subtilitas*, refers to a gift whereby the body, being now so permeated by the spiritual soul, is perfectly subject to it in every way so that the risen body itself can be called “spiritual.” Finally, because of the saints’ unchangeable and everlasting enjoyment of God, they will receive the gift of *impassibilitas*, a blessing which bestows not only unconquerable strength but also immunity from all suffering.

The appeal made to God in the prayer is both direct and personal: “Give to *my* body,” the Dominican prays: *Da corpori meo*. Then, after listing the four desired and amazing qualities of the resurrected body, he writes:

⁴³ *Te Deum totius consolationis* is one of the *Piae preces* attributed to Aquinas. The *Piae preces* can be found in both the Busa and Marietti editions of Aquinas’s work: Busa ed., vol. 6 (*Reportationes*), 584–85; Marietti ed., *Opuscula theologica*, vol. 2 (*De re spirituali*), 283–89.

⁴⁴ See Paul Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer: The Bible, Mysticism, and Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2013), 36–39, and 67–79.

⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas, “Prayer for the Attainment of Heaven” (Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 68, 71). See also Simon Francis Gaine, O.P., “Resurrection and Eschatology,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 361–80.

And add to these
 an overflow of riches,
 a spate of delights,
 a confluence of all good things,
 so that I may rejoice
 in your consolation
 above me,
 in a place of loveliness
 below me,
 in the glorification of body and soul
 within me,
 in the delight of friends and angels
 all around me.⁴⁶

What a very simple but memorable evocation of the celestial world! Against all expectation, this brief prayer is able to offer a glimpse, a hint, of that untold beauty and radiance. With regard to the final image of the prayer—Thomas looking forward with hope to rejoicing “in the delight of friends and angels all around [him]”—could that phrase, I wonder, that image, have influenced the stunning, unforgettable scene in Beato Angelico’s *Last Judgment* painting in Florence of the saints and angels dancing together in an open radiant space? Sadly, all too often, I suspect, the image of heaven that is fixed in the mind of certain believers is that of disembodied souls in heaven standing together—and *forever*—devoted members of a dull eternal choir. So, Angelico’s truly joyous vision offers a welcome change. That vision, however, is by no means unique. On the contrary, it is a vision happily shared by many other Christian saints. Here, for example, is St. Cyprian describing, with impressive confidence, the world of joy and fellowship awaiting the true disciples of Jesus in the afterlife:

We reckon paradise to be our home. . . . A great throng awaits us there of those dear to us, parents, brothers, sons and daughters. A packed and numerous throng longs for us, of those already free from anxiety for their own salvation, who are still concerned for our salvation. What joy they share with us when we come into their sight and embrace them! What pleasure there is there in the heavenly kingdom, with no fear of death, and what supreme happiness with the enjoyment of eternal life.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Aquinas, “Prayer for the Attainment of Heaven,” 68.

⁴⁷ St. Cyprian, *De mortalitate* (treatise VII), no. 26 (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum*

Bl. Bartolomé Blanco Márquez: A Death of Love

I began this paper by considering the witness of some of the early Christian martyrs. Now, to conclude, I would like to draw your attention to the witness of a young twentieth-century Spanish martyr, Bartolomé Blanco Márquez. He was twenty-one years old when, on 2 October 2, 1936, he was executed for refusing to engage in a bitter civil conflict on the side of the Communists. During his trial, he held fast to his faith as a Catholic. On the day he was executed, when the handcuffs were placed around his wrists for the last time, to the amazement of the guards, he kissed them!⁴⁸ Then, moments before the execution itself took place, in order that he might be more conformed to Christ, he took off his shoes and socks, declaring "Jesus was barefoot on Calvary; that's also how I want to go."⁴⁹ He turned down the opportunity of being shot from behind, declaring "Whoever dies for Christ should do so standing straight and looking forward."⁵⁰ Finally, with arms extended in the form of a cross, his face radiant with joy, he received his death as if it were a blessing, exclaiming as he fell under a shower of bullets, "Viva Christo Rey!"⁵¹ The young martyr was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI on October 28, 2007.

The day before his execution Bartolomé wrote a letter to his girlfriend, Maruja. What is immediately striking about the letter is the strength of the young man's devotion to God. "Though I am in my final days," he writes, "God is my light and what I long for."⁵² No less impressive in the letter is the depth of Bartolomé's affection for his girlfriend. "Your memory," he writes, "will remain with me to the grave."⁵³ Sometimes people imagine that strong devotion to God, and the desire to be with God in paradise, will inevitably dull a person's sense of all that is good and beautiful in this world. But nothing, of course, could be further from the truth as Bartolomé's letter to his young girlfriend so clearly testifies. Here, in its entirety, is the letter:

Latinorum, 3/1:313); trans. in Second Reading for Friday Week 34, *Divine Office*, 3:820.

⁴⁸ Francisco Granados Lara, *Un corazón de fuego: vida y escritos del Beato Mártir Bartolomé Blanco Márquez* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2009), 434.

⁴⁹ Lara, *Un corazón de fuego*, 434.

⁵⁰ Lara, *Un corazón de fuego*, 435.

⁵¹ Lara, *Un corazón de fuego*, 435.

⁵² Lara, *Un corazón de fuego*, 431; English from "A Martyr's Letter to His Girlfriend," *Zenit*, November 9, 2007, piercedhearts.org/theology_heart/teaching_saints/letter_girlfriend_memory_bartolome_marquez.htm (all further quotes in English are from this translation).

⁵³ Lara, *Un corazón de fuego*, 431.

Provincial Prison of Jaen, 1 October 1936

My dearest Maruja,

Your memory will remain with me to the grave and, as long as the slightest throb stirs my heart, it will beat for love of you. God has deemed fit to sublimate these worldly affections, ennobling them when we love each other in him. Though in my final days, God is my light and what I long for, this does not mean that the recollection of the one dearest to me will not accompany me until the hour of my death.

I am assisted by many priests who—what a sweet comfort—pour out the treasures of grace into my soul, strengthening it. I look death in the eye and, believe my words, it does not daunt me or make me afraid.

My sentence before the court of mankind will be my soundest defence before God's court; in their effort to revile me, they have ennobled me; in trying to sentence me, they have absolved me, and by attempting to lose me, they have saved me. Do you see what I mean? Why, of course! Because in killing me, they grant me true life and in condemning me for always upholding the highest ideals of religion, country and family, they swing open before me the doors of heaven.

My body will be buried in a grave in this cemetery of Jaen; while I am left with only a few hours before that definitive repose, allow me to ask but one thing of you: that in memory of the love we shared, which at this moment is enhanced, that you would take on as your primary objective the salvation of your soul. In that way, we will procure our reuniting in heaven for all eternity, where nothing will separate us.

Goodbye, until that moment, then, dearest Maruja! Do not forget that I am looking at you from heaven, and try to be a model Christian woman, since, in the end, worldly goods and delights are of no avail if we do not manage to save our souls.

My thoughts of gratitude to all your family and, for you, all my love, sublimated in the hours of death. Do not forget me, my Maruja, and let my memory always remind you there is a better life, and that attaining it should constitute our highest aspiration.

Be strong and make a new life; you are young and kind, and you will have God's help, which I will implore upon you from his kingdom. Goodbye, until eternity, then, when we shall continue to love each other for life everlasting.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Lara, *Un corazón de fuego*, 431–32.

Clearly there is nothing dull in Bartolomé's vision of what awaits him in the afterlife. Yes, first and last, he will be able at last to contemplate, face to face, the God of Light for whom he longs. But also waiting for him there, he trusts, he believes, will be his beloved Maruja. That thought, that implied vision of the afterlife, no doubt encourages him, here and now, to confront his death situation straight in the eye. His letter to Maruja is a single, private communication. Nevertheless, what he makes bold to write, at the point of death, gives clear expression to the vision of life and death shared by each one of the saints and martyrs included so far in this brief paper. Bartolomé is, we can say, speaking for all of them when with calm faith and indomitable courage, he writes: "I look death in the eye and, believe my words, it does not daunt me or make me afraid."⁵⁵ N.V

⁵⁵ Lara, *Un corazón de fuego*, 432.