

A Peaceful Death or a Perfect End: Two Visions of the Good Death in Christian Thought

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MANY PEOPLE ARE UNCLEAR as to what a good death is, especially a good Christian death. Nearly everyone agrees on what is a bad death: a highly medicalized death in the ICU with medical staff fighting until the last minute; a death leaving little time for the patient and her family to come to terms with mortality; a death portrayed as a painful failure of medical technique; a death experienced as a loss of control. The most prominent vision of the good death today is just the rejection of such a medicalized death. For example, a group of priests asked about good or happy deaths responded with phrases like “pain-free,” “dying with dignity,” or “surrounded by loved ones.”¹ Over the last fifty years dismay at the bad, medicalized deaths of our contemporaries has led to many attempts to help people reach this vision of the good death. One of the most valuable institutional and legal responses has been hospice and palliative medicine (HPM), which has done much to allow people to escape medicalized deaths. Recent efforts by the Pontifical Academy for Life have pressed for the expansion of HPM in part to push back against the other major response to medicalized death, assisted suicide.²

¹ Ken Leiser, “Clergy, Covenant Clinicians Review End-of-Life Issues at CHA Forum,” *Catholic Health World*, April 1, 2019, chausa.org/publications/catholic-health-world/article/april-1-2019/clergy-covenant-clinicians-review-end-of-life-issues-at-cha-forum.

² Carlos Centeno et al., “White Paper for Global Palliative Care Advocacy: Recommendations from a PAL-LIFE Expert Advisory Group of the Pontifical Academy for Life, Vatican City,” *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 21, no. 10 (2018): 1389–97.

More interesting from a theological and philosophical perspective have been the attempts by many to develop practices to help people prepare for death, such as by some secular authors like Atul Gawande or in the Conversation Project.³ There have also been Christian discussions of practices, many of which draw on the early modern art of dying tradition, the *ars moriendi*.⁴ This tradition was embodied in pastoral manuals that were first developed in the aftermath of the Black Death but maintained their popularity in diverse Christian denominations into the nineteenth century. These manuals explained virtues, practices, sacraments, and prayers that could help a person face death well. They were how-to manuals for dying.

However, the argument of this essay is that underlying these recoveries lies a secular vision of the good death, the peaceful death, which largely seeks immanent goods in the dying process, like comfort, control, and community.⁵ It is an aesthetic of dying, involving a certain choreographed deathbed scene. While none of these aims are unworthy to seek at death in themselves, I will argue in the first section of this essay that they raise problems when set as major goals of the dying process, especially since most people will not be able to achieve them in their end of life experiences. If many terminal illnesses will not allow this particular scene at the hour of death, people will be tempted to seize the initiative themselves, enacting the good death they seek through assisted suicide. Though HPM does great good and is a worthwhile goal to seek for itself, it will not prevent the expansion of assisted suicide, as evidenced by the fact that nearly 90 percent of those seeking assisted suicide in Oregon were enrolled in hospice.⁶ While a focus on practice is also useful, it is necessary to attend to

³ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014); details on The Conversation Project can be found on its website at theconversationproject.org/.

⁴ The pastoral literature and resources are vast. My focus is primarily on a set of academic theological conversations, the primary texts being: Christopher P. Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); *Dying in the Twenty-First Century: Toward a New Ethical Framework for the Art of Dying Well*, ed. Lydia Dugdale (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016). There are other texts that treat death in a different way, one more sympathetic to my analysis, such as Matthew Levering, *Dying and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

⁵ Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life: In Search of a Peaceful Death* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000).

⁶ Courtney S. Campbell and Jessica C. Cox, "Hospice-Assisted Death? A Study of Oregon Hospices on Death with Dignity," *American Journal of Hospice and Palli-*

the truth claims, frequently implicit, underlying a practice because it will shape how that practice actually influences action and character.

What is needed is a different vision of death, such as the one held by the earlier art of dying tradition outlined in the next part of this essay, in which death is almost always a dramatic, climactic moment. In this understanding of death, a good death was defined exclusively by whether a person repents or maintains faith, thus coming to salvation, a view summed up in the oft-cited line of John Damascene that death is for humans what the Fall was for angels.⁷ This view contained two elements. First, dying well aims beyond the mere immanent practice or moment of dying towards achieving the end of eternal life. Therefore, in death, one could accomplish the end of one's life by dying in Christ, both completing the work of one's whole life and receiving eternal life, no matter how unpleasant the deathbed scene. Second, this deathbed scene was conceived as a spiritual struggle against sin and temptation. It was a reenactment of the martyrs' struggle against the wiles of the devil. Even the virtuous person is assailed at the end of life and can only be successful through the gift of perseverance. Succeeding in this struggle to bring a completion to one's life is what Catholics pray for in the Liturgy of the Hours at Compline when they pray for a *finem perfectum*, what used to be translated as a "perfect end."⁸

Much of recent Christian ethical writing on death and the art of dying has repudiated this earlier Christian vision of the good death but has not replaced it with a clear alternative. Instead, these writings have sought to describe specific virtues and communal practices necessary for a good death. But I will argue that, lacking an articulated vision of a good death, they have incorporated aspects of the peaceful death, which is how *finem perfectum* is rendered in the current ICEL translation of the Liturgy of the Hours.⁹

The last part of this essay will argue that because much of the current writing in this area draws on this modern vision of a good death, it misinterprets the way that practices relate to virtue at death. Most writers assume that these texts focus on virtue as habitually formed through a

ative Medicine 29, no. 3 (2012): 227–35.

⁷ John Damascene, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 2.4. See references to Aquinas's use of this idea in Josef Pieper, *Death and Immortality* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 87, 140n8.

⁸ *Liturgia Horarum*, vol. 1, *Tempus Adventus Tempus Nativitatis* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1974), 540; *The Hours of the Divine Office in English and Latin*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1963).

⁹ International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *The Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 1, *Advent and Christmas Seasons* (New York: Catholic Book, 1975), 673.

lifetime of practice. Instead, these older texts on dying approach virtue in a much more Stoic manner, especially when they focus on the end of life. What they provide are techniques and meditations, Stoic therapies that one keeps ready-to-hand as weapons in the struggle that is the dying process.¹⁰ Better understanding these differing visions of virtue and the good death may allow us to better use these texts to address contemporary problems of dying.

The Peaceful Death

For many bioethicists, a focus on practices helpfully allows one to avoid a prescriptive vision of a good death, since, as Lydia Dugdale argues, a contemporary art of dying that would be useful for hospital bioethics would be a pluralist, secular art.¹¹ Yet, underlying many of the examples in such secular projects and many of the Christian recoveries is an implicit understanding of what makes for a good death. Daniel Callahan outlined the elements of this predominant view of the good death: the person accepts that he will die; the patient is conscious; the patient is surrounded by family and friends; and the patient is not in pain. Most importantly, the patient must maintain self-possession, “awake, alert, and physically independent.”¹² Stephen Latham gives a similar description of a good death: minimal suffering for a short period, no loss of capacities, the ability to affirm values, and “time to arrange for the kind of deathbed *scene* she desired.”¹³ In the documentary based on Gawande’s *Being Mortal*, one sees Jeff Shields dying this death.¹⁴ Though dying of cancer, he is alert until his last days and is able to die on his beautiful farm in the lush countryside, visiting with family until just before his death. Dying is peaceful, untroubled, and under our control.

This vision of dying derives, frequently explicitly, from *The Hour of Our Death*, Philippe Aries’s magisterial history of dying, which draws on

¹⁰ For Stoic therapies, see: Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Arnold Davidson (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995); Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹¹ Dugdale, “Dying, a Lost Art,” *Dying in the Twenty-First Century*, 3–18, at 5.

¹² Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 54.

¹³ Stephen Latham, “Pluralism and the ‘Good’ Death,” in Dugdale, *Dying in the Twenty-First Century*, 33–46, at 41 (emphasis mine).

¹⁴ Thomas Jennings, “Being Mortal,” *Frontline*, February 10, 2015, PBS, pbs.org/video/frontline-being-mortal/.

medieval chansons, Leo Tolstoy, and other works of literature, to give a picture of an older “tame death.”¹⁵ The tame death began with a premonition of death that the dying person accepted with resignation. Surrounded by his community, the person asked others for forgiveness, confessed his sins, settled his last worldly affairs, and commended himself and others to God.¹⁶ While Aries placed this death in the early middle ages, it is really the idealized death of any premodern peasant, as shown by his use of nineteenth-century fiction. That Elizabeth Kubler-Ross also began *On Death and Dying* by relating a similar anecdote of a Swiss farmer’s death shows the attraction of this idealized bucolic image.¹⁷

The first thing to note about both the tame and the peaceful deaths is that they are less spiritual or ethical discussions of death than a certain aesthetic of death. This aesthetic dimension is highlighted by Dugdale, who says in regard to the art of dying, that “art invites careful attention to the possibility of beauty.”¹⁸ Much of the power of Gawande’s example mentioned earlier comes from the beauty of the surrounding landscape and the home in which the death itself occurred. As Latham noted, it is the embrace of a certain deathbed *scene*: a patient surrounded by family and friends with no pain or spiritual distress. It would be a mistake to separate too strongly the spiritual and ethical from the aesthetic of course. Later in this essay, I will propose alternative aesthetics of dying. What is concerning is the *kind* of aesthetic at play in the peaceful death. It is a very bourgeois, even utilitarian aesthetic vision—no overwrought emotions, no pain, no mess, no existential dread. In one of his examples of a good death, Latham emphasizes the grace and manners with which the dying woman took an inopportune call.¹⁹ It is not an aesthetic that easily incorporates the Cross.

Second, we should note the emphasis on the control over the situation that the dying person exercises. In the tame death, this control only occurs because the dying peasant enacted a culturally stereotyped set of behaviors. In contrast, in the contemporary ideal of the peaceful death, personal autonomy and choice become central. The patient becomes the choreog-

¹⁵ Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Knopf, 1981), 5–28.

¹⁶ Ariès, *Hour of Our Death*, 6–18.

¹⁷ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families*, repr. ed. (New York: Scribner, 2014), 5.

¹⁸ Dugdale, “Conclusion: Toward a New Ethical Framework for the Art of Dying Well,” in *Dying in the Twenty-First Century*, 173–92, 174.

¹⁹ Latham, “Pluralism,” 41.

rapher arranging the aesthetic project of death—negotiating treatment regimens, curating the right people for the deathbed scene, determining where the death should occur, and so on. Even the weeks or months leading up to death must be arranged to meet certain immanent goals. Here, the medical staff works with the patient to realize her values and desires at the end of life. Gawande argues that doctors must discuss with patients what their values are, what their valued life activities are, and shape treatment regimens to meet them. The Zen Hospice in San Francisco seeks to help patients end their days spending time in the ways that they desire, even if that means facilitating them playing video games.²⁰ Much of this work entails helping patients enunciate the desires that they have, perhaps unknown to them before the dying process. Patients work down their bucket list.²¹

While many of these elements of the peaceful death are good or at least ethically indifferent in themselves, some aspects of the peaceful death suggest where problems might lie. Most superficially, ethicists should be suspicious of the narrative upon which it is based, a romantic narrative written by elite authors of idealized peasants dying deaths to which everyone should aspire. The concern is not that this might not be true in many cases, nor that the poor might not die better deaths than the rich. It is merely that the narrative seems too much like other idealizations of the premodern and contrasts with actual premodern sources. As Lucy Bregman argues: “The nostalgia model of ‘death as natural event’ is comforting. . . . But nostalgia can actively interfere with what the voices of the past were trying to say.”²²

From a theological perspective, the peaceful death is also dangerous because it is a *generic* vision of death rather than a tradition-specific view of death.²³ Even though its descriptions are drawn from Christian sources, Aries emphasizes that it “is not a specifically Christian death.”²⁴ It is generic like the generic spirituality that most hospital chaplains now

²⁰ Jon Mooalem, “The House at the End of the World,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2017, Sunday Magazine.

²¹ This is of course not how all HPM operates. Many practitioners and facilities aim to provide care more in line with Cicely Saunders’s original goal, which was much closer to older Christian visions. These frequently heroic efforts of practitioners are increasingly stymied by the corporatization of HPM and by this growing ethos of the peaceful death.

²² Lucy Bregman, *Preaching Death: The Transformation of Christian Funeral Sermons* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 15.

²³ Of course, this generic nature is a benefit in the eyes of Latham or Dugdale.

²⁴ Ariès, *Hour of Our Death*, 13.

offer, into which, of course, one can slot various tradition-specific rituals or values. However, these values or rituals are not essential to this form of death. They do not shape it. In its form, it is indebted to modern commitments to autonomy and control, allowing a person to choose a tradition, but not making such a tradition constitutive of the person. The secular ethics that govern most hospitals could embrace only such a vision of death. Because of this, this vision of death is open to being coopted by the technocratic imperatives of contemporary medicine.²⁵ Its avoidance of overwrought emotion or existential suffering allows the hospital to function more efficiently, and its encouragement of accepting death may decrease healthcare costs.

Even considered in itself in secular terms, though, this vision is inadequate because it sets up an impossible ideal. As Sherwin Nuland argued: “Occasionally—very occasionally—unique circumstances of death will be granted to someone with a unique personality, and that lucky combination will make it happen, but such a confluence of fortune is uncommon, and . . . not to be expected by any but a very few people.”²⁶ Most deaths will not be peaceful. They will be painful, disoriented, filled with existential concern. Even with the best will and efforts of the hospital staff, a large percentage of people will fail to achieve a peaceful death because of the nature of the person’s illness or because of other kinds of spiritual distress. When the peaceful death is set up as an ideal, a failure to achieve it threatens to become a personal or spiritual failure. Nuland relates a daughter’s dismay at her mother’s death: “It was nothing like the peaceful end I expected. I thought it would be spiritual, that we would talk about her life. . . . But it never happened—there was too much pain, too much Demerol.”²⁷ More troublingly, this vision of the good death does not match what Michael Banner has described as the long dying of late modernity, the fact that our deaths will not be short affairs.²⁸ Instead, there will frequently be a long period of physical decline before death, sometimes associated with intensive medical treatment and increased social isolation. Some of these aspects of dying are alterable by better practices, but others arise from fundamental features of the human condition. While any experience of

²⁵ M. Therese Lysaught, “Ritual and Practice,” in Dugdale, *Dying in the Twenty-First Century*, 67–86, at 82.

²⁶ Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life’s Final Chapter* (New York: Knopf, 1994), xvii.

²⁷ Nuland, *How We Die*, xvi.

²⁸ Michael Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 107–34.

death may engender grief and rage, an experience that runs against an unrealistic ideal will almost ensure it. If such deaths cannot be considered good deaths because they do not live up to the choreographed ideal, then they can only be considered a bad death, a failure.

In such cases, one might try to forestall the non-ideal death that illness lays before one, escaping the death that will be a painful challenge, the bad death, through assisted suicide. Suicide allows one to better choreograph one's death. For example, Brittany Maynard's video, which helped to make assisted suicide legal in California, dwelt beautifully on the aesthetics of her planned death.²⁹ The camera sits lovingly on the sunlight streaming in through the trees onto the bed in the upper room where she planned to take the fatal pills. She carefully lists the few friends and family who would attend her. She even noted that she would have her favorite music on in the background. Similarly, last year I received an email describing a death through assisted suicide that specifically emphasized the person's view of the Pacific Ocean as he killed himself. Here one sees the deeper dangers of an ideal of a peaceful death that does not match reality and is not supported by a rich set of traditions.³⁰ The Church will not be able to successfully oppose assisted suicide if it uncritically accepts this vision of the good death.

The Perfect End

The older Christian tradition had a very different aesthetic imaginary of a good death, which can be illustrated by a specific extreme example. Dante, in his description of the death of Manfred, seems to provide a portrait of what most people today would consider a bad death.³¹ Defeated in battle by armies allied with the Pope while contesting the mastery of Italy, he was struck down, betrayed by allies, dying painfully from his wounds alone on the field of battle. His death bore almost none of the hallmarks of dying well discussed by those attempting to recover a Christian art of dying. He had not led a life of virtue, instead embodying the splendid vices as he sought worldly glory and mastery, committing brutal sins to secure his

²⁹ Allie Hoffmann (dir.), *The Brittany Maynard Story*, October 6, 2014, youtube.com/watch?v=yPfe3rCcUeQ.

³⁰ One review criticized Dugdale's book for not fleshing out "the ways that euthanasia and PAS seem to fit with many of the themes developed here," such as embracing finitude, consciousness at death, and the presence of community; see Anthony P. Smith, Review of Lydia S. Dugdale, *Dying in the Twenty-First Century: Towards a New Ethical Framework for the Art of Dying Well*, *The American Journal of Bioethics* 17, no. 8 (August 2017): W1–2.

³¹ Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio* 3.103–45.

throne. He lacked community in two ways, dying alone and betrayed on the battlefield and, even more profoundly, excommunicated. Thus, he was also denied the sacramental and liturgical aids of the Church. From a secular perspective, he was a failure, his life ending exactly at the moment when all his plans and projects came to naught in humiliating defeat. Finally, it was a painful death. By any description contemporary discussions of dying might provide, Manfred died a bad death.

Yet, Dante meets Manfred not in the Inferno, but on the shores of the mountain of Purgatory. As he lay dying his painful, ignominious death, Manfred truly repented of his misled life. In God's mercy, he was admitted to Purgatory and thus the sure hope of eternal life, although with a delay. Such a vision of deathbed repentance has deeply shaped the Catholic artistic imagination of death, from the image of the good thief on the cross to the deathbed climax of *Brideshead Revisited*. While Protestant authors in the art of dying tradition scorned this model of deathbed repentance (although Jeremy Taylor allowed for a heroic repentance at death) and even Catholic authors were extremely skeptical of it,³² they would agree with the basic understanding of what makes for a good death: passing "to a life that is eternal and blessed in every way."³³

This older Catholic tradition agrees with Nuland's doubts about the peaceful death: while an attractive ideal that sometimes occurred, it was unlikely for most. Dying is a process surrounded by turmoil. In his *Preparation for Death*, Alphonsus Liguori repeatedly describes it as a tempest: "The time of death is a time of storm and confusion."³⁴ Cardinal Bellarmine, author of the most influential Catholic manual for dying, notes that the dying person is blown this way and that "by pain and weakness or by failing judgment or by fright at the nearness of death or by the love of dear ones whom they leave against their will."³⁵ It is a time of confusion brought on by both illness and the existential crisis of possible annihilation, distress both physical and spiritual. More practically, the Renaissance Catholic humanist Erasmus cites the sheer number of things to which the dying person must attend: consulting with doctors, making a will, reconciling

³² Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1897), 294, 425, 435; Alphonsus Liguori, *Preparation for Death*, ed. Eugene Grimm (Brooklyn, NY: Redemptorist Fathers, 1926), 65.

³³ Roberto Bellarmine, "The Art of Dying Well," in *Spiritual Writings*, trans. John Patrick Donnelly and Roland J. Teske, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 369.

³⁴ Liguori, *Preparation for Death*, 109.

³⁵ Bellarmine, "Art of Dying Well," 340.

with neighbors, receiving the sacraments, planning a funeral.³⁶ The time of dying is too busy to be peaceful. Because of this confusion, distress, and the pressing weight of obligations, even authors in the Catholic tradition doubted that a deathbed conversion was likely. For this reason, they urged an early preparation for death, which is the point much of the contemporary literature on dying emphasizes.

If one were to give a Christological example of this tempest at death, it would be the agony in the Garden, and this in two ways.³⁷ First, it is an agony in our sense of anguish. As Augustine argued, dying is a source of intense suffering: "For a sensation of anguish, contrary to nature, is produced by the force that tears apart the two things which had been conjoined and interwoven during life; and this sensation persists until there is a complete cessation of all that feeling which was present by reason of the union of soul and flesh."³⁸ It is against nature for the soul to be torn from the body, and thus humans revolt against it. Even those for whom death might be termed a good, the martyrs, experience dying itself as suffering.

There is another framing of agony though, one focused on its connotations of competitive struggle in athletics or warfare.³⁹ Erasmus described dying as "hand-to-hand combat" with the devil.⁴⁰ Similarly, Bellarmine, citing Ephesians 6:12, describes it as a wrestling match with demons.⁴¹ It is a last decisive struggle with temptation, with vices, with the devil. Erasmus set this framing in a Christological context as well: "We may assume that [Satan] employed every weapon in his arsenal when Christ was on the cross

³⁶ Desiderius Erasmus, "Preparing for Death," in *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, ed. John W. O'Malley, trans. John Grant, Collected Works of Erasmus 70 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 414. I would argue that many of these concerns continue today even with the longer time that one may have for preparation. Frequently, treatments continue until the last few days, and spiritual distress may strike at any time.

³⁷ For the use of the theme of agony in Spanish devotional literature, see Carlos M. N. Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32–33.

³⁸ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 13.6, in *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 547. Augustine develops an interesting but intricate discussion of when we can say death or dying actually occurs in 13.9–11.

³⁹ For agony as preparation for a contest see E. Stauffer, "Ἀγῶνία," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964).

⁴⁰ Erasmus, "Preparing for Death," 425.

⁴¹ Bellarmine, "Art of Dying Well," 352.

and Satan sees that death was near. . . . What Satan dared to do against our Lord he will dare also against us, who are members of his body.⁴² It is this framing of death that one sees so vividly displayed in the woodcuts from the earliest books of the *ars moriendi*.⁴³ In these, the temptations and virtues discussed in recent writings are not abstract states of mind and soul. Instead, they are armies of demons contesting with the equally present army of angels and saints for final victory. Here death becomes the most accentuated moment of the Christian life as a whole, which Pope Francis calls “a constant struggle against the devil, the prince of evil.”⁴⁴

This framing of dying is extremely important because it gives a possible positive valence to the sufferings occurring at death. As temptations brought on by the devil, they allowed the dying Christian to assimilate her experience to that of the martyrs, which is the second aesthetic found in the tradition. Erasmus uses the same image of hand-to-hand combat with the devil in regard to all deaths that Thomas More uses nearly contemporaneously in his last work, *The Sadness of Christ*, in regard to the martyrdom he faced.⁴⁵ In this way, the martyrs become the exemplars of the good death. Because of this connection to struggle and martyrdom, one finds Biblical images of competition and warfare again and again in *ars moriendi* texts: running the race, winning the crown, putting on the armor of the virtues, and so on. Further these authors drew on the martyrs as exemplars of virtues at death.

This analogy reaches back to the patristic period, such as in Cyprian’s *De mortalitate*, where one also finds three elements that later writers would use to justify seeing the suffering of ordinary Christian death as martyrdom. Cyprian’s occasion for writing was the great plague that swept the Mediterranean in the middle of the third century.⁴⁶ In between episodes of persecution, the church in Carthage found itself beset by illness. Cyprian consoled his flock in regard to the deaths that they saw all around themselves and taught them to prepare for their own possible death. Perhaps

⁴² Erasmus, “Preparing for Death,” 404.

⁴³ Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 110–35.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018), §159. See the similar discussion in Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), §37.

⁴⁵ Thomas More, *De Tristitia Christi*, ed. Clarence H. Miller, Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More 14 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 71. Erasmus and More use different Latin terms though, *cominus* versus *ad manum ventum*, so these are conceptual similarities highlighted by translation rather than direct quotations.

⁴⁶ Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 115–23.

oddly to our ears, one of the complaints he felt the need to address came from those who desired to die as martyrs. They lamented their death from illness because it would not allow them to witness to their faith by suffering at the hands of persecutors.⁴⁷ Cyprian encouraged them to accept the will of God in their death because what mattered was the intention of martyrdom. For those in whom “martyrdom is conceived in the mind, the intention dedicated to good is crowned, with God as judge.”⁴⁸ Thus, one could receive the reward of a martyrs’ death even if one died from disease.

Moreover, suffering disease bore some of the marks of a martyr’s death. It too was an assault by the devil on the believer, as with all the sufferings of life.⁴⁹ “Though it should be the constant and violent affliction of the members by wasting diseases, though it should be the mournful and sorrowful tearing away from . . . departing dear ones, let not such things be stumbling blocks for you, but battles: nor let them weaken or crush the faith of the Christian, but rather let them reveal his valor [*virtutem*] in the contest.”⁵⁰ Second, if the goal of martyrdom is to witness to faith, one could prove one’s faith by enduring the suffering of illness well. Third, it served to exercise virtue. “These are trying exercises for us, not deaths.”⁵¹ Thus, the suffering of even a death from illness was framed by the themes of a battle with the devil, a witness to faith, and a test of one’s virtue. These goals are interlinked in the Catholic tradition, as later writers will point to Job as one whom God allowed to be tested by sufferings inflicted by Satan.

If one moves forward to the main thread of the art of dying tradition, one finds these same themes, although they are articulated in different ways by different authors. Erasmus, as noted above, emphasizes combat with the devil, who assails the dying Christian. The confusion and distraction at death is due in large part to the variety of attacks that one suffers, “for it is at this time that Satan presses hard with every trick at his disposal.”⁵² To respond, Erasmus uses military metaphors, as he does in other writings. Drawing on Paul, the Christian is a soldier and thus must stand “in the battle line ready to fight.”⁵³ She must accept the hardship that she faces in her service.

⁴⁷ Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 17, in *Treatises*, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 212–13.

⁴⁸ Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 17 (pp. 212–13).

⁴⁹ Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 9.

⁵⁰ Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 12 (p. 208).

⁵¹ Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 16 (p. 212).

⁵² Erasmus, “Preparing for Death,” 414.

⁵³ Erasmus, “Preparing for Death,” 423. See also 2 Tim 2:3. The use of metaphors of military service in relation to death is part of Christian texts, but it also has a long pre-Christian pedigree. Epictetus adverts to our duty under the command

These uses of battle metaphors are distinct from the use of war metaphors in medicine criticized by feminist authors such as Susan Sontag and Barbara Ehrenreich.⁵⁴ Understandably, these authors dislike such imagery, especially in relation to cancer, because they lead to a justification of over-treatment as a means of total war. Moreover, these battle metaphors portray those who succumb to the disease as losers in their fight. Death seems a defeat. In the *ars moriendi* tradition in contrast, the battle is not fought between medicine or the patient and the disease, but between the dying person and temptation or vice. Thus, death, far from being a defeat, is the moment that the individual enters into her reward. It is the moment of victory.

The Anglican Jeremy Taylor has much to say about struggling with the devil, but his distinctive focus is much more about God testing the individual. Sickness “is the opportunity and the proper scene of exercising some virtue. It is the agony in which men are tried for the crown.”⁵⁵ His framing is that the suffering of dying is how God tests the individual’s faith, but also prepares the person for great things. The struggle of death is both pedagogic and examinatory, with Christians “struggling against disease, and resisting the devil, and contesting against the weaknesses of nature, and against hope to believe in hope, resigning ourselves to God’s will.”⁵⁶ These understandings of suffering and testing are found in Job, but most especially in Sirach 2. Yet, Taylor’s rendering of this framing of death goes much further than any other writer in the *ars moriendi* tradition, echoing Seneca’s description of God enjoying the combat of the virtuous in *De providentia*, which is also an extreme text by Stoic standards.

Despite Taylor’s enthusiasm, it is important to emphasize that none of these authors encourage an ascetic masochism at the moment of death. There is nothing in these authors that would preclude the use of advanced palliative care to remove physical suffering. Further, as a later section will discuss, these authors provide an extensive pastoral armory to soothe existential distress. Their point is that these resources will rarely be completely effective in removing suffering from the experience of dying. In this, they are merely accepting the reality of the situation. What framing death in terms of struggle or martyrdom allows the dying person to do though is to

of God to stand fast in the face of trouble and not withdraw, such as at *Discourses* 3.24.31–36.

⁵⁴ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Barbara Ehrenreich, “Welcome to Cancerland,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 2001, 43–53.

⁵⁵ Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, 372.

⁵⁶ Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, 375.

use the evils attendant on death well, as Augustine saw the martyrs doing, to come to the end of one's life holding on to one's faith and hope.⁵⁷ It allows one to incorporate suffering into one's moral projects.⁵⁸

The Erasure of the Vision of the Good Death

Recent discussions of the *ars moriendi*, such as in Christopher Vogt or Allen Verhey, have rejected almost all parts of this older vision of death. While accepting that martyrdom was an aspect of older Christian framings of death, they do not find it a particularly compelling framing for the contemporary Christian experience of dying.⁵⁹ First, recent theological understandings of martyrdom have tended to focus on a response to injustice.⁶⁰ Further, there is a concern that martyrdom focuses on conflict with others rather than the conflict with the self. Finally, it may valorize suffering.⁶¹ This rejection of martyrdom goes along with a more general contemporary dismissal of the Christian concept of redemptive suffering that was so central to older Christian understandings of death. With the loss of the analogy to martyrdom, there is no way to valorize the sufferings of the struggle at death.

Further, recent authors reject the vision of a struggle over the fate of the individual soul. First, there is a concern about the seemingly judicial notion of sin involved in these portrayals.⁶² These authors also question the focus on the last moments to the exclusion of the entirety of life, in part for reasons expressed by earlier authors in the tradition as to the likelihood of deathbed conversions, but also in part as a rejection of other parts of the earlier tradition. For Verhey, individual judgment seems too Platonic, allowing for salvation immediately following death, and thus drawing the

⁵⁷ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 13.8.

⁵⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 166–67.

⁵⁹ Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope*, 102; Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 350. See especially Vogt's discussion of the tie between the deaths of Stephen and Jesus. An exception to this general statement would be Levering, who clearly accepts the vision of death as a possible spiritual struggle (*Dying and the Virtues*, 145–46).

⁶⁰ Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope*, 119. For this understanding of the Cross, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁶¹ Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope*, 104; Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 350–54.

⁶² Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope*, 33; Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 143. For concerns over a judicial understanding of sin in Catholic moral theology, see John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Christian's attention away from the resurrection of the body and the Last Judgment.⁶³ This critique is concerned about the individualism of this picture, that it looks to the salvation of the individual soul rather than to the person belonging to the community of the Church. It must not be the death of the individual soul analogous to martyrdom, but death in community pointed toward the resurrection.

In this way, the older vision of the Christian death is erased. However, these authors have not replaced it with another vision of death, another narrative for understanding the deathbed scene. In a salutary way, these authors have refocused attention on the imitation of Jesus, which should be central to the Christian death as to all parts of life. Yet, this imitation does not occur through an imitation like martyrdom, nor necessarily through a reenactment of the Cross. Instead, this imitation is understood as the enactment of certain virtues. This interpretation has also led to an engagement with the communal practices necessary to form and shape these virtues.⁶⁴ These virtues are traced to the death of Christ, but not in such a way as to show exactly how the ordinary Christian's death looks like Jesus's, other than the practice of virtue.⁶⁵

This understanding of death leads to three problems. First, because the older Christian vision of the deathbed is rejected but not replaced with a new concrete articulation, the contemporary Christian understanding of death becomes infiltrated by aspects of the vision of the peaceful death, which is predominant in our culture. The practices of the Christian art of dying are generally described against the predominant forms of medicalized dying and, to a lesser extent, assisted suicide, defining what they negatively stand against but not necessarily what shape of death they positively support. One cannot do without a paradigmatic death to which to conform oneself, though. In its absence, that place is taken by what is ready-to-hand. Though many Christian ethicists criticize the natural-death model of the "death awareness" movement inspired by Kubler-Ross,⁶⁶ many have in subtle ways embraced the deathbed scene offered by this same movement.

Most straightforwardly, almost all discussions of contemporary dying, even Christian recoveries of the art of dying, begin with Aries's tame death as the alternative to medicalized dying to which one must return,

⁶³ Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 143.

⁶⁴ Lysaught, "Ritual and Practice," 79.

⁶⁵ Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope*, 97–121; Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 216–54.

⁶⁶ E.g., Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 49–59.

or at least find a contemporary analogue.⁶⁷ Further, others have accepted Callahan's peaceful death, perhaps not as an ideal, but at least as a minimal understanding of a good death.⁶⁸ Even when struggle is brought into the understanding of death in opposition to the peaceful death, it is understood as "a much more inward, personal struggle to come to terms with their own finitude and helplessness," which becomes the task of death.⁶⁹ It is important to note that Callahan also points to this need to come to terms with finitude and dependency, a point that even Kubler-Ross could affirm.⁷⁰ There are other ways that the peaceful death invades the work of astute scholars, so one could imagine that it would be even more prominent in the minds of the broader public.

Second, the loss of a clear vision of death means that death itself loses something of its specific meaning and importance. The art of dying loses its specificity if it is merely an encouragement to imitate Jesus, as one should do in all of one's life. One sees the effacement of the specific importance of death in the repeated emphasis in these authors to prepare for death over one's entire life, that "the best *ars moriendi* is an *ars vivendi*."⁷¹ The texts of the older tradition generally did have sections devoted to shaping oneself throughout one's entire life, but they also had large sections devoted specifically to the deathbed itself.

Virtue and Dying Well

The third danger is that once one loses this older understanding of death, one begins to misunderstand what the role of virtue was in these older texts. One must have a fairly clear sense of what one means by dying well. If it is a peaceful death one seeks, a death marked by the achievement of immanent goods at the moment of death, then virtue does not assure it. Even the good may die in pain and existential distress. Older texts repeatedly assert that one cannot judge whether a death was good or not based merely on the manner in which a person dies.⁷² Lacking our palliative medicine, they frequently used the example of painful deaths. Taylor says one should not judge a person's death just because they are overcome

⁶⁷ Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 11–13; Lysaught, "Ritual and Practice," 69–70.

⁶⁸ Lysaught, "Ritual and Practice," 81.

⁶⁹ Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope*, 119. See also Jeffrey Bishop, "Finitude," in Dugdale, *Dying in the Twenty-First Century*, 19–32, as well as the argument against painting death as good or indifferent in Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 93–109.

⁷⁰ Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 91–119.

⁷¹ Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope*, 9.

⁷² Erasmus, "Preparing for Death," 420.

and cannot control their outward signs of pain.⁷³ Spanish authors used the death of Philip II as an exemplum even though it was extraordinarily painful and physically degrading.⁷⁴ Many of these authors see an important part of imitating Christ's agony in one's own is accepting the will of God in the manner of one's death. Thus, the struggle of a seemingly bad death may serve a purpose unknown to us.

Even spiritual distress is no sign of bad character or a bad death.⁷⁵ In those with faith, Erasmus says, fear "arises from the awareness of our own fallenness," more so than in those who do not believe in the afterlife.⁷⁶ The good will have difficulty and be sorely tempted. According to Bellarmine, "even very good men are tempted by the devil to the sin of despair as they leave this life."⁷⁷ Saint Alphonsus admits that "hell does not cease to tempt and attack even the saints at the hour of death," and that "many saints have died with great fear of being lost."⁷⁸ It is true that Saint Alphonsus responds by saying that the virtuous will have peace of a sort, in the form of aid and consolation from God.⁷⁹ Even this is not assured though, since "the more a soul gives itself to God, the more strenuously hell labors to destroy it."⁸⁰ These works contain many stories of holy men and women assailed by doubts and trials as they approach death.⁸¹

Only a few very holy people are granted what our contemporaries would call a peaceful death. Indeed, one is almost more likely to die peacefully if one is wicked. Bellarmine describes how those who have lived lives devoted to greed, preying on the weak, die completely satisfied with themselves, unworried by their end or future.⁸² Taylor argues that presumption is a more common and greater danger than despair.⁸³ Recent writings have similarly emphasized the dangers of presumption in a world denuded of a sense of sin and the need to cultivate a sense of penitence.⁸⁴ Thus,

⁷³ Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, 353.

⁷⁴ Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory*, 300–21.

⁷⁵ Erasmus, "Preparing for Death," 430; Liguori, *Preparation for Death*, 99.

⁷⁶ Erasmus, "Preparing for Death," 426.

⁷⁷ Bellarmine, "Art of Dying Well," 356.

⁷⁸ Liguori, *Preparation for Death*, 98–99.

⁷⁹ Liguori, *Preparation for Death*, 98–99, 102.

⁸⁰ Liguori, *Preparation for Death*, 313.

⁸¹ See a more recent example of the temptation to despair in Simone Troisi and Cristiana Paccini, *Chiara Corbella Petrillo: A Witness to Joy* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 2015), 80.

⁸² Bellarmine, "Art of Dying Well," 358.

⁸³ Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, 500.

⁸⁴ David Elliot, *Hope and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 110–38; Levering, *Dying and the Virtues*, 64–79.

virtue is far from an assurance of a peaceful death, nor is vice necessarily a hindrance.

One might respond that, surely, virtue is more helpful when one places one's ideal of dying well in maintaining one's relationship with God, since virtue must be an aid in achieving eternal beatitude. Even then, though, virtue is not as much a help as it is frequently portrayed in the contemporary literature, especially since virtue in regard to death is frequently framed in terms of habitual virtue. As Vogt described the importance of virtue ethics for dying well, "the key to preparing for a good death is the development of virtues throughout one's entire lifetime."⁸⁵ Similarly, Therese Lysaught and Verhey describe the preparation for death as a life-long process of communal practices that serve to shape us in virtue. Yet, from the discussions in these texts and in Aquinas, it is not clear that such habitual dispositions are adequate. As Patrick Clark and John Bowlin have shown in great detail, since the act of courage, which includes patience in the face of death, is in some sense contrary to our desires, there is always a gap, a space of choice, between habitual virtue and courageous action.⁸⁶ In this, it is unlike other virtues in which desire and right action generally align. Because of this gap, Aquinas argues that in order to persevere to the end, Christians need not just habitual virtue but *auxilium*, the help of grace to persevere in the face of "the attacks of the passions" in individual instances.⁸⁷ The dying process is when these attacks of the passions are at their most intense. Saint Alphonsus makes this same point in regard to the need for the gift of perseverance at death: "Paradise is promised to those who begin a good life, but is only given to those who persevere."⁸⁸ The whole Western Augustinian tradition focused on this need for perseverance rather than merely virtue.

These problems do not mean that a virtue approach is useless; they just indicate that these discussions of the virtues of the dying might need to take a slightly different form. While the authors in the older art of dying tradition all encourage forming virtues early in life, their main focus as

⁸⁵ Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope*, 2.

⁸⁶ John Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas's Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Patrick Clark, *Perfection in Death: The Christological Dimension of Courage in Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

⁸⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 109, a. 10, II–II q. 137, a. 4 (trans. Dominican Fathers of the English Province). For *auxilium*, see Joseph P. Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action: "Merit" in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).

⁸⁸ Liguori, *Preparation for Death*, 24.

death approaches is to ensure that one holds onto one's faith against the temptations of the moment. All is not lost if one has failed to attain full virtue, nor is one safe if one is virtuous. Instead one must use therapies to fight against the continuing danger to the soul. In taking this approach, they engage in a Stoic rather than Aristotelian model of virtue.⁸⁹

There are two distinctions that help to illustrate the importance of these differences. First, for the Stoics, virtue is knowledge, since, unlike in Aristotelianism, in Stoic psychology there are no prerational affective faculties.⁹⁰ Thus, living virtuously just means adhering to and acting in line with a true understanding of reality. This distinction plays out in a second difference in how each system understands practical reason, best illustrated by the Aristotelian and Stoic uses of the metaphor of craft in relation to prudence. While Aristotle strongly distinguishes *technē* from *phronēsis*, he still uses craft metaphors to illustrate how prudence and virtue in general operate. The crafts he discusses tend to be productive crafts like building or medicine in which one seeks to attain a certain good, such as a house or health. In contrast, Stoics clearly assimilated craft and prudence, which was the art of living.⁹¹ However, they tended to use very different craft metaphors, frequently from sports such as dancing or boxing in which the end is contained in the activity itself in the immediate moment.⁹² The end is beautiful performance in fidelity to the knowledge of the craft or to wisdom in the case of prudence.

The craft of dying as outlined by these authors is not so much concerned

⁸⁹ It is of course a mistake to envision these as mutually exclusive alternatives. Christian authors have frequently used elements of both, or elements of Aristotle and Plato, or Stoicism and Plato, in ethical thought. See: Sarah Catherine Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Matthew Kruger, "Aquinas, Hadot, and Spiritual Exercises," *New Blackfriars* 98, no. 1076 (July 1, 2017): 414–26. They remain helpful ideal types to use to explicate particular frameworks, though.

⁹⁰ For overviews of Stoic ethics, see: A. A Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (New York: Scribner, 1974); Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1985); Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*; Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*; Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*; Gretchen Reydam-Schils, *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁹¹ John Sellars, *The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003).

⁹² Victor Goldschmidt, *Le système stoïcien et l'idée de temps*, 2nd ed., Bibliothèque D'histoire de La Philosophie (Paris: Vrin, 1969), 148–50.

with making, nor achieving a certain immanent good. Instead, it is an art that allows one to respond to the vicissitudes of the moment of death. While Christian appropriations of Stoicism seek an end beyond this life, one attains that end by remaining faithful to the truth in the moment despite the trials one faces. Thus, the appropriate metaphor for practical reason in the face of death might be boxing: attaining prudence is like learning to take a punch. The art of dying allows one to face the struggle of dying without losing faith or hope.

It is not enough to have general virtuous habits, therefore. These texts seek to teach the person how to respond to specific attacks or temptations that will throw the person off balance and into confusion. Similarly, these texts are seeking techniques that one can use that allow one to respond to these attacks.⁹³ Thomas More says that what Christ gives is “a fighting technique and a battle code for the faint-hearted soldier.”⁹⁴ That More is talking about technique rather than general virtue is shown by the fact that he spends much of the next eighteen of the precious few pages that he was allowed in prison in what he knows would probably be his last work castigating his reader for poor posture and distraction while praying. Other techniques in this literature are vivid pictures that grasp people, diverting their attention from other thoughts, tricks of mind that allow one to put aside doubts, or striking phrases that stay in one’s memory.⁹⁵ The goal of these texts is to teach these techniques so that the dying person will have them ready-to-hand to respond in the moment.

This strategy accounts for some of the oddness of these texts, such as in the discussions of resistance to doubt in order to maintain the virtue of faith. Some authors have been disappointed by their focus on the articles of faith and other formulas rather than the deeper meaning of faith as trust in God. Verhey regrets that “faith is defined in ways that seem to privilege intellectual assent and obedience to the church’s laws.”⁹⁶ It is all much stranger than Verhey discusses though. To respond to temptations against faith, Erasmus provides a little set response that one can use against the devil, a dialogue repeated by Bellarmine.⁹⁷ The story goes like this: A

⁹³ For discussions of the way these techniques were used in the philosophical life and spiritual direction, see: Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*; Ilsetraut Hadot, *Sénèque: direction spirituelle et pratique de la philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 2014).

⁹⁴ More, *De Tristitia Christi*, 109.

⁹⁵ For a similar technique, see the focus on the necessity of an imaginative grasp of the afterlife and the use of examples in Levering, *Dying and the Virtues*, 37.

⁹⁶ Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 147.

⁹⁷ Erasmus, “Preparing for Death,” 441–42; Bellarmine, “Art of Dying Well,” 353–54.

learned scholar on his death bed is approached by the devil who asks him questions about abstruse doctrines like the mystery of the Trinity. Satan outwits the confused scholar through his devious argumentation, thus step by step causing him to doubt all the truths of faith. After death, the damned scholar appears to a friend to relate how his soul was lost. This friend, also a scholar, did not trust in his learning on his deathbed. When questioned by the devil as to his doctrinal belief, he responds, "I believe what the Church believes." When asked what the Church believes, he responds, "What I believe." Thus he goes back and forth with Satan like this, firm in his faith until he dies.

What is one to make of this? The underlying conviction is that our existential trust in God is dependent upon our beliefs in what reality truly is. Faced with the struggle and hardships of dying, a person is apt to doubt her core beliefs: the providential guidance of God, an afterlife, whether reality is absurd. These doubts may hit one wholesale or may be introduced step by step by doubts as to smaller issues. As Vogt correctly emphasizes, such doctrinal understandings of reality are central to one's hope.⁹⁸ The wisdom of these strategies is that one is not able to reason or argue to proper conclusions while stricken by the confusion attendant upon death, so one should not try. One knows they are just temptations brought on in the tempest. Instead, one should rest confident in the Church despite any doubts. Taylor makes a similar point when he directs the dying to concentrate on articles of the faith, not the arguments surrounding them. "Let him lay fast hold upon the conclusion, upon the article itself. . . . He can receive no good at all if Christ did not die, if there be no resurrection, if his Creed hath deceived him."⁹⁹ Erasmus provides a similar, even longer dialogue between the devil and a dying person in regard to hope and despair.¹⁰⁰ In contrast to some who would try to see the deeper lesson in these dialogues, we must understand them as techniques. The lesson is to hold tightly to the simplest lessons and tactics.

In regard to despair due to one's sins, these texts make use of another Stoic tactic, exemplars and vivid images. They tell stories of repentant sinners, whose sins were far worse than the dying person's, whom God forgave. These are not attempts to shape a narrative imagination, but ruses to grab the mind, diverting attention from one's worries so that one maintains hope. Again, the pictures of martyrs in the woodblock

⁹⁸ Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope*, 21.

⁹⁹ Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, 420.

¹⁰⁰ Erasmus, "Preparing for Death," 442–44; Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope*, 21–22.

prints vividly bring to mind their heroic patience. A final tactic draws on proverbs, striking phrases, especially in regard to the worthlessness of the things of this world. Commentators worry that such texts seem to make worldly goods seem worthless, even bad, thus encouraging Platonism or Manicheanism. Yet, these proverbial saying are the tools the texts use to fight the temptation to mourn worldly goods rather than focus attention on readying oneself for the next life. At this point, the spiritual guide must point out the superiority of that for which one hopes. It would be pastorally useless to give detailed, accurate discussions of how Christians also believe creation to be good and so on.

As noted above, critics say this whole program is too individualistic, focused on the individual's salvation achieved through techniques used by the individual himself. To many, it sounds too much like the autonomous individual asserting technological control over the spiritual process of death, an alternative realization of the peaceful death's demands for control and self-possession. This interpretation would misunderstand what the *ars moriendi* texts seek though. First, these techniques assume as a starting point that the individual is not in control. The individual is assailed by more powerful forces, confused, in pain, and storm-tossed. They assume this vulnerability and help the dying to deal with it by accepting their dispossession. The goal of these techniques is to aid the Christian to hold firm in his total trust in God, to trust even in the loss of control and possibility of annihilation, to hope despite one's manifest failings, and to give over all to accepting the will of God.¹⁰¹ In this framework, one is far from the autonomous choreographer of one's own death, but is dependent upon the power of God. One resorts to the most desperate of stratagems to hold fast to one's faith.

Second, this art of dying is a communal art. The dying person relies on those around her to bolster her faith and remind her of the proper techniques, guiding her through the dying process. This model relies just as much on the curation of visitors to the deathbed as does the peaceful death but uses radically different criteria for the choice. The deathbed *accompagneurs* are not chosen because they will be pleasant or lead to an appropriate deathbed scene. Indeed, these texts are disturbingly skeptical of the family's presence. It is not because this literature hates the family, but because they may not serve the end at which dying aims. The family threatens to distract the dying person and cause regret, nor will they be the most efficacious in their prayers. Bellarmine says: "Nor should one admit just any sort of person to visit the sick person in his last moments, but only

¹⁰¹ Liguori, *Preparation for Death*, 372–82.

pious and good men.”¹⁰² These pious people will serve a purpose in aiding the dying person to hold fast to faith.

The most important assistance these attendants provide is prayer. Most recent writing on the art of dying discusses the importance of prayer, but largely as a practice that shapes the dispositions and character of the dying person.¹⁰³ In contrast, these older texts were concerned with its effectiveness, not in terms of whether it helps one to get better, as so much research in medicine and spirituality now tries to prove, but in the struggle with temptation. The prayers of those surrounding the dying person beat back the temptations of the devil. “The devil can do only what God permits; therefore we have no doubt that fervent prayer to God whether by the sick person or by those present is very effective.”¹⁰⁴ The bedside companions are not there for pleasant conversation or even exhortation. They “should learn not so much to speak with the sick person as to pray ardently for him.”¹⁰⁵ Through these means they also call in the broader community of the communion of saints to lend its aid. Finally, through prayer, the community implores God to grant perseverance to the dying, since it can only be obtained through God’s gift. “This gift of perseverance is . . . given only to those who ask it. Hence St. Thomas asserts that to enter heaven continual prayer is necessary.”¹⁰⁶ Here one sees the dying Christian dependent on the community of the Church at the broadest scale. These texts all recognize dependence on God’s will.

Conclusion

Bregman notes: “When we turn to earlier voices, we can hear something very disturbing, very unlike what we hope from them.”¹⁰⁷ She takes this as a sign of their lack of usefulness for addressing current problems, but one can also find their strangeness helpful. It is exactly in their radical unfamiliarity that they help us to think otherwise about our current situation. First, focusing on their unfamiliar aspects helps us better understand what the art of dying texts were trying to achieve. They sought a specific end, eternal life, by seeking to aid the dying to either attain or hold fast to repentance and faith in God, which is the perfect end to life. The goods to be attained were not immanent, with death itself understood to be a

¹⁰² Bellarmine, “The Art of Dying Well,” 366.

¹⁰³ Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 303–25.

¹⁰⁴ Bellarmine, “Art of Dying Well,” 365.

¹⁰⁵ Bellarmine, “Art of Dying Well,” 366.

¹⁰⁶ Liguori, *Preparation for Death*, 24.

¹⁰⁷ Bregman, *Preaching Death*, 15.

difficult struggle for almost everyone. Thus, virtue is not only something to be formed earlier in life and relied upon, since even the virtuous are challenged and may not persevere. Instead, the focus at death became the Stoic end of holding fast to one's understanding of the world through a set of techniques that sought to overcome specific challenges. These texts should direct us toward seeking a better theological understanding of what a good death as a perfect end is.

Second, this understanding of the end to be attained is tradition-specific, creating difficulties for finding a neutral art of dying for pluralist hospitals and hospice programs. These texts suggest that Catholics should not try to frame the good death in terms of the peaceful death. Expanding HPM, while a worthy goal for itself, will not counteract this new embodiment of the culture of death alone, especially if it subtly underwrites a problematic understanding of dying. Many HPM practitioners do provide something like this richer understanding of death to their patients, but they are facing a difficult struggle if even Christians come to them expecting a peaceful death. For most people, death will not be peaceful, but a struggle with distress of various sorts, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual. Providing such realistic guidance may help assuage the guilt of individuals and their families when death does not conform to an unrealistic ideal. Many have noted the disciplinary nature of the stages of grief,¹⁰⁸ but the peaceful death can be just as constraining. The dying need not feel guilty about existential distress, because they expect it. The family need not feel that they could have done more to make the dying process optimal but can be assured that their prayers provided more help than they can imagine. Most importantly, it may also provide an alternative script so that people do not merely attempt a peaceful death through suicide. It allows people to positively appropriate a difficult struggle. These possibilities should drive us to help people regain a better imaginary surrounding death, perhaps through better liturgical translations.

Finally, these texts suggest that theological discussions need a slight change of focus. Instead of the broader frameworks of death and eternal life or communal practices, perhaps more focus needs to be placed on developing specific, simple techniques or tricks for confronting individual temptations at the end of life. Theologians cannot expect those facing death to shift or deepen their understanding of the Christian message. Instead, pastors may need to find ways to help them stand fast in what faith they have against specific assaults. While this vision of death is not

¹⁰⁸ Jeffrey Bishop, *The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 253–78.

comforting, it has the benefit of corresponding in many cases more closely to the actual experience of death, preventing the forestalling of death or despair at the lack of peace. Such a vision allows Christians to testify to the reality of the situation and to offer accompaniment and support to the person in her struggle.

N.V.