

Dying Well:

Spiritual Essentials and Practical Advice for the Family

Introduction

In the last two articles in this series on A Christian Ending to Our Lives, we examined the origin and meaning of death, the cultivation of the remembrance of death as a fundamental virtue in the Christian life, and a Christian perspective on aging as a preparation for translation to the next life. The present article considers the spiritual essentials and practical advice for the family in facing the challenge of dying well.

Spiritual Essentials

Dying is not easy

The separation of the soul from the body is most unnatural, and a tremendous trial. This trial that the soul experiences at the time of bodily death is more painful than most imagine. For the agony of its parting from the body within which it lived for many or a few years; its struggle with the body; its crying over the body in difficult times or rejoicing in its delight at happy events, cannot be compared with any of the trials of the present life.

The Last Trials

The evil spirits tempt us to sin at the point of death. At the end of life there is always a special trial to be endured, and no believer, no matter how pious, can approach death nonchalantly. The model for us on how to die well is the pious death of the Most Holy Mother of God. One of the real shocks for many Christians who read the life of the Mother of God and observe her sacred feasts with devotion is to learn how seriously she approached her own repose. It was a matter of the greatest concern to her. She prepared conscientiously for her death by visiting all the holy places where her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, walked, delivered His teaching, worked His miracles, died, was buried, rose again, and ascended to heaven.

On the Mount of Olives the Holy Virgin knelt and prayed, asking her Son our Lord to grant that she might be unattacked by the demons at the time of her death. She asked Christ to shelter her from the "dismal sight of the demons" (*The Life of the Theotokos*, p. 448). This concern of the Most Pure Virgin as she approached death is reflected in the beautiful prayer to the Mother of God at the end of Little Compline, in which we pray, "And at the time of my departure from this life, care for my miserable soul, and drive far from it the dark visions of evil demons; and in the fearful day of judgment, deliver me from eternal punishment, and present me as an inheritor of the ineffable glory of thy Son, our God."

The Virgin also asked her Son that she might be warned three days before her repose, and she was. The Archangel Gabriel appeared to her, spoke of her coming dormition, and gave her a palm branch from paradise. The Virgin prepared for her repose. The Apostle John stayed close to her. She changed her clothes, decorated her

room and the entire house, and lit many lamps and much incense. She gave her last words to the Apostles and the women. The Holy Virgin asked if all would watch with her and pray, and they spent the whole night in psalms and chants. All were weeping and wailing, but the Mother of God was rejoicing and assured all that she would be their advocate and intercessor in heaven. She ordered that her garments be distributed to two poor widows, and asked that she be buried in the Garden of Gethsemane where her parents, Ss. Joachim and Anna, and St. Joseph the Betrothed were interred.

She reposed August 15th at the 3rd hour, or 9 a.m. After blessing each of the Apostles, she stretched out her hands to heaven and prayed, saying, "I adore, praise and glorify Thy much-to-be-praised name, O Lord, because Thou hast looked upon the lowliness of Thine handmaiden, and because Thou that art mighty and hast done great things for me; and, behold, all generations shall call me blessed." After this prayer, she said to the Apostles, "Cast incense and pray, because Christ is coming with a host of angels; and, behold, Christ is at hand, sitting on a throne of cherubim." When they had prayed, there was thunder from heaven and there came a fearful voice, as if of chariots; and, behold, a host of angels and powers, and a voice, as if of the Son of Man, was heard. Then there shone in the room an indescribable light which dimmed the lamps. Those that were granted this vision were awestruck. Many beheld the roof of the apartment open and the glory of the Lord descending from heaven. It was Christ the King of Glory with hosts of angels and archangels, and all the heavenly powers. Also with them were the holy fathers and prophets who prophesied of old concerning the pure Virgin, and all the righteous souls approached His immaculate Mother. In joy she surrendered her pure soul into the hands of her Son.

The Final Confession

Judge yourself here and you will not be judged. The demons take hold of unconfessed sins, and cannot accuse us if we have already accused ourselves. The normal life of a Christian begins in Holy Baptism, where we have complete remission. The sacrament of holy confession is how we keep our baptismal garment pure and radiant,

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Icon courtesy of Janet Jaime.

and our consciences clean. As we approach our own deaths we ought to do so with repentance, contrition, and humility. We ought to confess our sins thoroughly, and receive absolution. This is basic and fundamental to a peaceful death.

The Final Apologies

Together with confession, we should seek reconciliation with all before death. We seek forgiveness from all, and ought to make sure that we go to our deaths without any unfinished business. We should ask each of our loved ones individually to forgive us all the sins we have done against them throughout the years of our mutual sojourning. If we ourselves have shamefully maintained any grudge against any person, we must forgive him or her, or we ourselves will not be forgiven by God. This is a very serious matter. The Lord God takes reconciliation extremely seriously.

In our tradition there is a story that hails from third-century Antioch and involves two clergymen who were friends, Father Sapricius and Deacon Nicephoros. The two had a major falling out. The deacon eventually repented of this long and bitter alienation, and sought many times the forgiveness of Fr. Sapricius, but, sadly, the latter

would have nothing of it, even when the deacon threw himself at his feet. Eventually Fr. Sapricius was arrested and was led off to martyrdom. He started off strong, but grew weak as he made his way to the place of execution. Eventually, just before suffering martyrdom he apostasized and lost his soul. Grace flees from an unforgiving heart.

The Final Communion

The last thing we eat is the very body and blood of Jesus Christ. We want our lips to be sealed with the Eucharist. We want the conqueror of death in us as we face death.

This is the road to a pious repose – final apologies and reconciliation, final confession, and final communion. These are fundamental for us. When you give direction to your families about questions of life support and special health measures, make sure that you take into account these important things. Even if someone’s life cannot be sustained long-term, if one can help the dying person regain consciousness so that confession and communion and goodbyes can be made, this is a worthy effort. After one has fortified oneself with the sacraments, life-support can be removed, and death more confidently faced.

Practical Arrangements for the Family *Be Prepared*

Talk with your loved ones about death, and how you would like matters to be. Talk while you can, because a time may come when you will not be able to speak, but might want to.

Make End-of-Life Arrangements Ahead of Time, and Tell Your Family and the Church
These arrangements to include the following:

1. *Durable Power of Attorney (DPOA)* – Who has authority to make decisions for you when you are incapacitated? This is very important and serious. Make sure that your spouse has authority, or, if there is no spouse, authorize someone you completely trust.

2. *Living Will* – This stipulates what measures, if any, you wish to be taken to prolong your vital functions, from “none” to “every heroic effort.”

The Durable Health Care Power of Attorney (DHCPOA) appoints a person and an alternate to make life-and-death decisions on your behalf as you direct them in your living will. [Families should be aware that, although it is rare, some facilities may try to make money by admitting people to hospices before it is necessary, or to save money by giving substandard end-of-life care, or may even hasten death. (See <http://www.hospicepatients.org/> and <http://www.illinoisrighttolife.org/EndOfLifeIssues.htm#hospice02>.) – Ed.]

3. *Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) Order* – Usually this is used by those with a terminal illness. Resuscitation is not a given. On the other hand, staff may take extraordinary but questionable measures when death is imminent, or one can be attached to machines at the end when one would prefer not. DNR orders must be on file in a care facility, and posted near one’s bed in the hospital, to be effective.

4. *“Post Mortem Instructions for the Disposition of Bodily Remains upon My Death”* – The typical form is a straightforward document naming an executor of your “final wishes” concerning after-death care and funeral arrangements. Especially note your opposition to being embalmed, donating your organs, having an autopsy, or allowing anyone to call a mortuary, without your executor’s explicit permission. Often hospitals and nursing homes have pre-arrangements with funeral homes for body transport which can be very expensive and is unnecessary. There is no

law saying one must ride in a hearse. In fact, vans and station wagons are used by the mortuaries for these less glamorous “pick-ups.” In most states a family member holding a DHCPOA can act in lieu of a funeral director; fill out and file end-of-life documents; obtain a proper transport certificate and transport the deceased in any type of vehicle to any destination.

5. *Burial and Funeral Care Instructions.*

6. Will you employ your parish Burial Society?

7. Will you employ a mortuary?

8. Where will you be buried? Make sure you make it clear that you refuse cremation on religious grounds. This is important especially if you do not have extended family, because cremation is the default for the state.

9. What do you want on your headstone?

10. What will you wear?

11. What casket do you want?

12. How do you want to be transported to and from the church and cemetery?

13. How do you want payment for funeral costs to be made?

14. Who would you like to be notified at the time of your incapacitation? At your repose? Who would you like to be at your funeral?

15. Who will write your obituary? Have you provided them the basic information?

16. Where are your important documents that your loved ones will need (birth certificate, marriage certificate, deeds and titles, mortgages and notes, records, insurance policies, attorney and doctor records, etc.)?

17. These basic forms will be provided to you at our last course session, with the hope that you will fill them out and file them with your family, and those that are relevant to the church with the church.

Consider Establishing a Living Trust If You Own a Home

This is a gift to your descendants and allows them to focus on prayer and spiritual help instead of the pressures of business. It also can save the beneficiaries of your estate immense headaches and the horror of expensive and time-consuming probate.