



ON THE BEAUTY OF DYING

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By Monsignor Charles Pope

It goes against everything the world believes, but there can be something extraordinary in a Christian death.

In the Gospel [...] the Lord spoke of us giving away all we had to come and follow him. To many that sort of talk seems crazy and we wonder how we can ever do it. But in fact we WILL all do it, as we finally die to this world and have our only treasure in Heaven.

As a priest it has been my privilege to accompany many on their final journey as they prepare for death. Some have gone quickly, others have lingered for years in nursing homes. From a pure worldly perspective, death seems little less than a disaster and a cause for great sadness. But from a perspective of faith there is something “beautiful” going on.

I know you may think it bold that I describe it this way, but in the dying process something necessary and beautiful is taking place. It is born in pain but it brings forth gifts and glory if we are faithful.

In particular I see two scriptures essentially fulfilled in many who are dying.

I. And Jesus said, “Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 18:3).

When I walk the halls of nursing homes I behold a rather astonishing thing: Men and women who raised families, ran businesses, protested bravely in the Civil Rights Movement, fought wars, gave sage advice to their children, commanded respect in their workplace and communities, most of these have become like little children.

Some can no longer walk, some need to be fed, some cry and need consolation, some hold dolls, many wear diapers, some can no longer talk, many need constant care. “Ah, how tragic,” the world says. But an increasing part of me sees a beauty, for they are changing and becoming like little children. A kind of innocence is being restored, and a complete dependence, without which they may never make it to heaven. Now their status as little children is fully evident and they become humble enough for heaven.

Painful but beautiful, very beautiful.

A very dear friend of mine died a few years ago. Catherine had been the Pastoral Associate and business manager of the parish of my first pastorate. I depended on her for practically everything, and she knew just about everything, having been at the parish for over 50 years. Rather suddenly, she came down with a rare and aggressive form of Alzheimer's disease. Within six months of diagnosis she no longer remembered anyone. And yet there was a childlike joy that came over her. She had a favorite doll she hugged close and when I would walk in the room she would light up. She no longer recognized me as far as I could tell but she loved

company. And she would sing, without clearly understood words but it seemed a kind of childlike nursery song.

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A remarkable thing to see. Here was a woman I had so thoroughly depended on now in such a state. But she was happier than I had ever seen her. She had become like a little child, and it was clear that God was preparing her for heaven. That was a gift, though a painful one.

And another great gift was this: Almost to her last day, she never failed to recognize Jesus in the Eucharist. Long after she had stopped recognizing anyone else, she still received communion with great devotion. She might be humming or looking around, but as soon as I reached in my pocket for the pyx, she stopped, looked and made the sign of the cross and folded her hands. That was years of training and faithfulness. It was a beautiful testimony of her undying faith in the Eucharist and her last lesson to all of us.

II. There is only one thing I ask of the Lord, this alone I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and gaze on the beauty of the Lord within his temple (Psalm 27:4).

Now I suppose most of us who are still healthy and reasonably active would have a hard time really praying this prayer absolutely. The fact is we want a lot of things: a pay increase, creature comforts, good health, we want for the project we are working to go well, and yes, somewhere in all that, God too and heaven, but later. You understand, heaven can wait.

And yet how obtuse our desires can be. It's really quite strange to want anything more than God and heaven, but, fact is, many struggle to want God more than the things of this earth. Somehow God has to gently purge us of earthly desires so that, little by little, all we want is Him.

And here too the dying process is so important and beautiful. Little by little in life we give back to God our abilities, our health, many of our loved ones. And finally we are led to that place in our dying days when we are given the grace to give everything back.

I remember my father saying to me in his final weeks, "I just want to be with God." I heard my grandmother say that too, and many other I have accompanied on their final journey, "I just want to be with God." And they meant it too. It wasn't a slogan now. They had given everything back, their treasure was now in heaven. They had sold all they had for the "pearl of great price." Now they could sing the words of the old spiritual: "You may have all this world, just give me Jesus." Indeed, they had sold, given away, everything they had, and now they were ready to follow Jesus.

For just about all of us it will take the dying process to get us to the place where we too can say, "There is only one thing I ask of the Lord, this alone I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and gaze on the beauty of the Lord within his temple."

And so there it is, the “beauty” of dying. It is a strange and painful beauty to be sure, but it is beautiful nonetheless. In an age of euthanasia that sees no purpose, no value in the dying process, we do well to behold and proclaim its strange but true beauty. We ought not fail to recognize the dignity of the dying who fulfill scripture as they make their final passage.

Surely we grieve, but through faith we also perceive a strange and wonderful beauty.

One of the finest hymns about dying was written by Henry F. Lyte in 1847. He wrote this as he approached his own death from tuberculosis:

*Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.*

*Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see —
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.*

*Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies;
Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.*

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