

The Christian Art of Dying

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In discussing the ages of the spiritual life, there is nothing, I would argue, as important or as difficult as facing the reality of death.¹ Nothing as important, as I will show in this paper. But, to begin, nothing as difficult, for our understanding of the relationship between life and death has changed fundamentally over the past century, in ways that are truly tectonic, shifting the landscape on an unprecedented scale.

What I have in mind is this: very few people today (in the West) see death. We know that people die, and we see their bodies. But compared to the situation a century ago, there is a marked difference. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most people would have had one or more of their siblings die during their childhood, and one or more parent dying before they reached adulthood (and now, our parents live on till we ourselves are beyond the life-expectancy of previous ages). Deceased siblings, parents, friends, and neighbours would have been kept at home, in the parlour, being mourned and waked by friends and neighbours, washed and prepared for burial, until being taken from home to church, where they would be commended to God and interred in the earth.

Today, however, the corpse is removed as quickly as possible, to the care of the death professionals, the morticians, who embalm the body, to make it look as good as possible, which is then placed under rose-tinted lights in a funeral home so that they look alive, in the hope that we might make a comment such as 'I've never seen them looking so good'! The casket is then often closed during the funeral service. Or, as is increasingly happening today, there is no funeral service: the body is disposed of in a crematorium, and then, later on, there is a

¹ Much of the following paper is drawn from my new book, *Becoming Human: Meditations on Christian Anthropology in Word and Image* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013), where many more dimensions are explored in greater depths.

'memorial service', in which the person is celebrated without being bodily present.

All this betrays a very ambiguous, and disturbing, attitude to the body: no longer seeing death, our focus is now ever more on the body. We exercise and look after our body more than any previous generation, and we might do so under a veneer of Christian theology, arguing that ours is an 'incarnational faith' in which the body is the temple of the Spirit. But then at death, we discard the coils of the mortal flesh, and think of the 'person' liberated from the body. Today, we live as hedonists and die as Platonists!

In a very real sense, we no longer *see* death today: we don't live with it, as an ever-present reality, as has every generation of human beings before us. This shows itself in so many ways. Just as one example, consider the way in which we now speak of death as being a kind of moral failure: so and so 'lost the battle with cancer'.

There was been much discussion, in the latter part of the last century, of our 'denial of death'. But it would seem to me that the problem is deeper and more difficult. If it is true that Christ shows us *what* it is to be God in the *way* that he dies as a human being, then, quite simply, if we no longer 'see' death, we no longer see the face of God.

The fact that Christ shows us *what* it is to be God, in the *way* that he dies as a human being, sums up the theological heart of the creeds and definitions of the early Councils. He shows us *what* it is to be God (not *who*), for he is consubstantial with the Father; and he shows us this in the way in which he dies as a human being—not simply by dying, but the way in which he dies: 'trampling down death by death'. What it is to be human and what it is to be God—death and life—are shown together, in one concrete being (ὁπόστασις) with one 'face' (πρόσωπον).

By that which expresses all the weakness and the impotence of our human nature—that whatever we do, we will die—by this, and nothing less, Christ shows us what it is to be God, for his strength is made perfect precisely in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). This gospel message—that by his death Christ has destroyed death, so granting us life and delivering us, not from death itself, importantly, but 'from the fear of death' (Heb 2:15)—has to be the starting point for our

reflections on the role of death in the spiritual life, as it is for all theology.

In doing so, we must be aware of a transformation in perspective that is necessary to reach a genuinely theological perspective. This transformation is similar to the transition from the Synoptic Gospels to that of John. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the disciples do not really understand who Christ is until after the Passion; and so they run in fear at his crucifixion. Only subsequently, when the risen Christ opens the Scriptures so that they could recognize him in the breaking of the bread, do they then understand how Moses and all the prophets could speak of how the Christ must suffer to enter into his glory (cf. Luke 24).

The Gospel of John, on the other hand, begins where the Synoptics end, that is, with the Scriptures already opened: as Philip tells Nathaniel, 'We have found the one of whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote', prompting Christ to say, 'you will see greater things than these' (Jn 1:44-51)! As told by the Theologian, Christ is always the one from above, the one who goes to his Passion voluntarily, so that his lifting up on the cross is his exaltation in glory, witnessed to by his mother and beloved disciple standing at the foot of the cross.

This transition is affirmed in every celebration of the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, when the priest says 'in the night in which he was given up', and then adds 'or rather, gave himself up for the life of the world'. This movement from 'given up' to 'gave himself up' is really the turning point, at which a historical report becomes a theological reflection. Here theology proper begins: Christ was put to death, but in the light of God's vindication of the crucified Christ, we affirm that 'he gave himself up for the life of the world'. The transforming power of God is demonstrated through the death of Christ: not simply his death, his being put to death, but by his voluntary death, as an innocent victim, going to the cross in obedience to his Father for the salvation of the world.

Now, in the light of this, what can we say about the role of death in our life?

Human Mortality

Clearly a lot revolves around death, and how one understands death depends upon how one perceives it. As a biological event, death is unavoidable and simply a matter of fact: all things that come to be in time will pass away in time. We came into existence without any choice on our part. Through an act of procreation between a male and a female, we have each been cast into existence. So much for freedom and free will! 'Nobody asked me if I wanted to be born!' as Kirilov put it in Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*.

It is, moreover, an existence in which whatever we do we will die. However 'good' we try to become, we assuredly will die—again, without any choice on our part. In fact, death is the only unavoidable part of our existence. It is the only thing about which I can be sure, and, thus, the only thing which I must contemplate. Death is a necessity for me, as my existence is a given for me. However, as we begin to reflect on the fact of death in the light of Christ's triumph over death, we can begin to see further aspects to this, making the transition from a human perspective to a divine perspective, in the apocalyptic opening of the mystery of Christ.

The first thing we can see is that death is, in fact, tragic. This is, of course, a natural reaction. Yet why it should be so, and not simply a neutral fact, is really only understood in the light of Christ. Prior to the coming of Christ, there was no real sense in the Old Testament that death itself is tragic. Violent death, death at the hands of the ungodly and wicked is certainly tragic. But death at the fullness of ripe old age, with family around, in peace, and with a proper burial was held to be natural, right and proper, so that, for instance, the death of Abraham or Job, with all their posterity around them, is a blessed death. And we often speak this way to those who are bereaved, comforting them.

Yet, now, however, in light of Christ's victory over death, death is now revealed to be 'the last enemy' (1 Cor 15:26). Only now can we understand that men and women don't simply die as a neutral, biological fact; they die by having turned away from their Creator, their only source of life. And this turning away, apostasy, falling into death is not *simply* something that happened at the beginning of time—someone else's fault! It is something that each of us struggles with constantly in this life. We are constantly tempted, as Adam, to think that we are actually sufficient unto ourselves, that we have life in

ourselves, that the life I have is my own, to do with as I please, and that should I perhaps feel I want to be 'good' or 'religious', *I* can do so by doing something charitable for my neighbour, as long as it doesn't threaten my own stability and well-being, or by allocating *some* time to God, on Sunday, for I don't want to be a fanatic after all! Yet living this way, eventually and certainly we will find out that however 'good' or 'religious' we make ourselves, we will still die, returning again to the earth as dust.

However, if we take our reflection one step further, in the light of Christ, we can see even greater profundity in the depths of the wisdom and the providence of God. Just as the Passion of Christ is the starting point for understanding the tragic dimension of death, so, too, it is the starting point for understanding the overarching work of God. Death is indeed the catastrophe that happens when the creature turns his back on the Creator, the source of life. Death is the most human of actions; it is the only thing that we have in common from the beginning of the world onwards, and it is an action which expresses all the weakness and the impotence of our created nature, and yet by death, and nothing less, has Christ shown himself to be God. And in so doing, without minimizing the tragedy of death, Christ has opened up a way of seeing a deeper mystery in death. In fact he has transformed death throughout all time, for what was once the end, now becomes the beginning.

Baptismal Death as Birth into Spiritual Life: From Breath to Spirit

What this transformation and beginning is, is indicated by St Maximus in some very striking words.² Christ, as St Maximus put it, has 'changed the use of death'. Through death, Christ has provided, says Maximus: 'another beginning and a second birth for human nature, which through the vehicle of suffering, ends in the pleasure of the life to come.' Christ, Maximus continues, has 'converted the use of death', so that 'the baptized acquires the use of death to condemn sin, which

² For what follows see St Maximus the Confessor, *Questions to Thalassius*, p. 61, ed. C. Laga and C. Steel, Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca 22 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1990); Eng. trans. in P. M. Blowers and R. L. Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected writings from St Maximus the Confessor*, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003).

in turn mystically leads that person to divine and unending life.' Through his Passion, destroying death by death, Christ has enabled us to *use* our death, the fact of our mortality, *actively*. Rather than being passive and frustrated victims of the givenness of our mortality, complaining that it is not fair, or doing all we can to secure ourselves, we now have a path open to us, through a voluntary death in baptism, to enter into the body and life of Christ. Whereas we were thrown into this mortal existence, without any choice on our part, we can now, freely, use our mortality, to be born into life, by dying with Christ in baptism, taking up his cross, and no longer living for ourselves, but for Christ and our neighbours. In doing this, our new existence is grounded in the free self-sacrificial love that Christ has shown to be the life and very being of God himself, for as we have seen Christ has shown us what it is to be God in the way he dies as a human being.

In Chapter 15 of the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul distinguishes between the breath of life and the Spirit of life or life-creating Spirit. Following Genesis, Paul points out that the first Adam was animated by 'a breath of life' to become 'a living being' (εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν cf. Gn 2:7), while, in contrast, the 'last [or final] Adam became a life-creating spirit' (εἰς πνεῦμα ζωοποιόν 1 Cor 15:45). Here Paul is discussing the resurrection of the dead and what kind of body the raised shall have. The difference is not between a 'physical' body (as the RSV translates ψυχικόν) and a 'spiritual' body; the continuity is precisely the body itself, and the difference lies in the manner in which it lives, either as animated by a breath of life or vivified by the life-creating spirit. And the transition is effected through the death of the breath: 'What you sow does not come to life unless it dies' (1 Cor 15:35).

Animated by a breath of life, Adam could have used this gift of life in a divine manner. But to do so, as Christ reminds us and shows us, requires living not for oneself, but rather being willing to die to oneself and live for others: 'whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever would lose it for my sake will gain it' (Mt 16:25). Christ himself shows us what divine life (the life of the Spirit, rather than the breath) looks like by his own sacrifice. But, not having yet seen this, Adam, and we, take life to be our own possession to do with as we please, and trying to secure his own immortality ends up ever more

enmeshed in the passions of this world, in sin, 'the sting of death' (1 Cor 15:56).

Despite our knowledge of our own mortality, or rather because of it, we are tempted to hold on to this 'life' as we know it, to do whatever we can to secure it, to live it as mine for as long as I can perpetuate it. It is not so much death itself, but rather the 'fear of death', as the Letter to the Hebrews put it, that has held us 'in life-long bondage' (Heb 2:15). Because of this fear of death, we do all that we can to preserve our lives, everything from working to make sure that we have bigger and more secure houses, ever larger savings and pension funds, doing all we can to preserve our life by ensuring our health. And yet we kid ourselves—all through the fear of death.

But, through the work of Christ, the gospel demonstrates to us that life comes through death: it is 'to those in the tombs' that Christ gives life. If we don't live for ourselves, trying to create our own mortality, if, rather, we learn even now to take up the cross, to die to ourselves and to live for Christ, his Gospel and for others, then the very life that we begin to live, even now, is eternal—it cannot be touched by death, for we have entered into it through death. We will be living the life of the Spirit, and not simply breathing.

Bodily Death and Creation

We, as Christians, have committed ourselves, through our sacramental death in baptism, to living by taking up the cross, by dying to ourselves, and living for others. But we all know that even if the life that we begin to live this way is the life of God himself, divine and everlasting, we will still nevertheless die physically. There is in fact a kind of paradox about our lives now. We are caught in what I can only describe as the first-person singular. At the end of the day, I can only say: didn't I die well to myself today; it is still me who is acting. However, by learning how to die to myself daily, taking up the cross and living for others, when it does come to my actual physical death, I will be able to say: into thy hands I commend my spirit. I will have learnt to let go of all that holds me to this world, and will then rest in God. And, in point of fact, then, and only then, will I become clay in his hands, for although we speak about God taking clay in the beginning (Gn 2:7), I have never been clay. But I will become clay in

and through my own death. And then, when I stop working, God can finally be the creator, fashioning me as a living human being. As we say in the vesperal psalm:

When you take away their breath they die and return to their dust; when you send forth your Spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the ground. (Ps 103/4:29–30)

The movement is from breath to Spirit, and, through our death, to finally being created. The movement in Scripture is always from death to life: 'I kill, that I might make alive' (Dt 6:4).

Through our death we learn, finally, the true nature of our weakness, and so, simultaneously come to know the power of God made perfect in weakness. We stop trying to 'create' ourselves, and instead become clay in the hands of the creator, clay which he fashions into flesh, with a fleshly heart (now that our hearts of stone have been broken down), to become a living human being, the being which St Irenaeus calls as 'the glory of God'.³

Our physical death, moreover, will reveal where our heart truly lies. If we have learnt, in this life, to love God and to live as Christ has shown divine life to be, we will be able to die in peace and relax in his hands, and come to life everlasting. If, on the other hand, our heart lies with this world—our possessions, our money, our self-image, and so on—then we can be absolutely sure that our death will be painful, for it will be a separation from all that we love. One way or another, each and every one of us will die, we will become clay. The only real question is whether, through this life, we have learnt to become soft and pliable clay in the hands of God, breaking down our hearts of stone so that we may receive a heart of flesh, merciful and loving. Or whether, instead, we will have hardened ourselves, so that we are nothing but brittle and dried out clay that is good for nothing.

³ St Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, 4.20.7. Ed. and French trans. A. Rousseau, B. Hemmerdinger, L. Doutreleau, and C. Mercier, *Sources Chrétiennes* 100 (Paris: Cerf, 1965); English trans. Ante-Nicene Fathers 1 (1885; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987).

Two Witnesses

Two early witnesses to the reality that the life of Christ comes through death—two martyrs—might help us gain further insight into this mystery of a Christian death. When St Ignatius of Antioch was taken underfoot and under guard from Antioch to Rome, to be martyred there, he wrote a letter to the Roman Christians imploring them not to interfere with his coming trials or, for instance, not to try to keep him alive by bribing the authorities. While journeying slowly but surely towards a gruesome martyrdom, he nevertheless embraces his fate with joy, exclaiming:

It is better for me to die in Christ Jesus than to be king over the ends of the earth. I seek him who died for our sake. I desire him who rose for us. Birth-pangs are upon me. Suffer me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die...Suffer me to receive the pure light; when I shall have arrived there, I shall become a human being (ἄνθρωπος). Suffer me to follow the example of the passion of my God.⁴

Compared to our usual patterns of speech, life and death are here reversed. His martyrdom *is* his birth, Ignatius has not yet been born. He, like all of us, has merely come into existence, involuntarily, without any choice on his part; but through his voluntary death in conformity to Christ, he will be *born*, freely. It is, moreover, a birth into existence as a human being.

Now, and only now, is freedom and self-sacrificial love the ground of Ignatius' existence, the freedom and love, which is God's own. And so, taking this path, Ignatius becomes a human being, 'mature manhood in the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph 4:13), who alone has shown to us both God and man.

The idea that it is only in this way that he will become a human being seems to have its background in the relationship between the Gospel of John and Genesis. It is well known that they both begin 'in the beginning'. But there is a deeper connection. Genesis opens with God speaking everything into existence, with a divine 'fiat'. But then God begins his own project, the only thing about which he takes

⁴ St Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, 6, ed. and tr. K. Lake, Loeb Classical Library, Apostolic Fathers 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985 [1912]).

forethought, not with an injunction, but with the subjunctive: 'Let us make a human being, in our image, after our likeness' (Gn 1:26). God does not say simply 'Let there be...' nor does the text continue 'and it was so'. In fact, its completion is first announced with the culmination of all theology in the Gospel of John the Theologian, when Christ is on the Cross and says with stately majesty, 'It is finished' (Jn 19:30), shortly before which, and only in John, we have the words from Pilate: 'Behold the human being' (Jn 19:5).

Scripture thus opens with God's announcing his project, and concludes with its realization. Adam is 'a type of the one to come' (Rom 5:12), a preliminary sketch, as it were, the fullness of which is first manifest in Christ, the one who uses his breath to go voluntarily to the cross on behalf of others, so 'imparting the Spirit to all those who would follow him in taking up the cross and becoming, in this way, human beings in his stature. Whereas God speaks everything else into existence by his divine fiat, 'Let it be', we are the ones who must give our fiat to complete the only thing said to be the work of God!

The second martyr is Blandina—a young slave girl martyred in Lyons around AD 177. Her martyrdom was described in a letter probably written by St Irenaeus of Lyon.⁵ As a young slave girl—the epitome of weakness in the ancient world—she personifies Christ's words to Paul: 'My strength is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor 12:9). She was so 'weak in body' that the others were fearful lest she not be able to make a good confession. Yet, she

was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way, from dawn until dusk, were weary and beaten. They, themselves, admitted that they were beaten...astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and broken.

Not only is she, in her weakness, filled with divine power by her confession, but also she becomes fully identified with the one whose body was broken on Golgotha: when hung on a stake in the arena,

⁵ *The Letter of the Martyrs of Vienne and Lyons*, preserved in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica (H.E.)*, 5.1–2, ed. and tr. K. Lake, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980 [1926]).

Blandina, hung on a stake (ἐπὶ ξύλου), was offered as food for the wild beasts that were let in. She, by being seen hanging in the form of a cross, by her vigorous prayer, caused great zeal in the contestants, as, in their struggle, they beheld with their outward eyes, through the sister, him who was crucified for them, that he might persuade those who believe in him that everyone who suffers for the glory of Christ has for ever communion with the living God...the small and weak and despised woman had put on the great and invincible athlete, Christ, routing the adversary in many bouts, and, through the struggle, being crowned with the crown of incorruptibility. (*H.E.* 5.1.41–2)

Through her suffering, Blandina becomes identified with Christ: (as with Paul, cf. Gal 2:20) she no longer lives, but Christ lives in her. She *is* his body; this is a much more profound ‘incarnational faith’ than the aside with which we started.

This is, of course, only seen by those who are undergoing their own ordeal with her in the arena, those who have also truly taken up the cross. Those looking down from the seats in the amphitheatre would have looked upon the spectacle quite differently, though perhaps some were moved to reflect further on what kind of witness she was providing. Blandina’s passage out of this world is Christ’s entry into this world, and this is again described as a birth. After describing her suffering, and that of another Christian called Attalus, the letter continues:

Through their continued life the dead were made alive, and the martyrs showed favour to those who had failed to witness. And there was great joy for the Virgin Mother in receiving back alive those who she had miscarried as dead. For through them the majority of those who had denied were again brought to birth and again conceived and again brought to life and learned to confess; and now living and strengthened, they went to the judgment seat. (*H.E.* 5.1.45–6)

The Christians who turn away from making their confession are simply dead: their lack of preparation has meant that they are stillborn children of the Virgin Mother, the Church. But now, strengthened by the witness of others, they also are able to go to their death—and so the Virgin Mother receives them back alive, finally giving birth to living children of God. The death of the martyr is their ‘new birth’, and the death of the martyr is celebrated as their true birthday.

Taking Back Death

Now that we have explored some of the greater and deeper import of the fact that it is *by his death* that Christ conquers death, so changing the ‘use of death’ for all time, we can see that our spiritual life begins with death and culminates with death, death, however, not simply as an end that we dare not speak about, the ultimate battle we are always going to lose, nor even simply as ‘the last enemy’, as the apostle speaks of it (1 Cor 15:26), from which we might even now, mistakenly, think that we are somehow free. But the voluntary death to the self that is the lived expression of the free self-sacrificial love, that Christ has shown to be God’s. Beginning this path with baptism, growing ever more into this reality and finally transforming our own actual death into a manifestation of the paschal mystery.

If it is true, as I suggested earlier, that Christ shows us what it is to be God in the way that he dies as a human being, then, if we don’t see death (as I also claimed that modern society doesn’t), we will not see the face of God either. If we don’t know that life comes through death, then our horizons will become totally immanent, our life will be for ourselves, for our body, for our pleasure (even if we think we are being ‘religious’, growing in our ‘spiritual life’). And so, I would argue, we need to regain the martyric reality of what it means to bear Christian witness. Our task today is not just to proclaim our faith in an increasing secular world; it is, rather, to take back death, by allowing death to be ‘seen’, by honouring those dying with the full liturgy of death, and by ourselves bearing witness to a life that comes through death, a life that can no longer be touched by death, a life that comes by taking up the cross.