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Theology of Death

My first personal experience of being with a dying person through the process of dying took place while I was living in a Franciscan friary in Germany. I had just left the seminary and as yet did not have any extensive pastoral experience. This occasion involved an elderly friar with a very colorful career as a chaplain in the Kaiser's army, and later as a preacher of parish missions and retreats. During the Nazi period this friar ran into frequent conflicts with the SS and was kept on the road for most of the later years of that period. He seemed to be preaching the wrong things. When I knew him, he was living in retirement in the friary which I called home for four years during my stay in Germany.

One evening, he did not show up for dinner. When members of the community went to see where he might be, he told them to call the Superior and bring the oils. He wished to be anointed. He sat in his bed, propped up with pillows, as the community gathered around his bed. We prayed the Latin texts of the rite as the Superior anointed the patient. In the meantime, the patient participated in the praying of the Latin prayers with a booming preacher's voice. He did not sound weak or frail. And when the rite was completed, he called out with utter clarity: "This is the end of the following of Christ." He then lay back on the bed, closed his eyes, and stopped breathing.

The impact of this death-scene has never left me. This all took place before I had heard anything about the contemporary movements dealing with death and dying. But I came out of that room with the clear impression that this man was actively engaged in the script of his demise right up to the very end.

THE QUESTION OF DEATH

How can anyone talk about what happens when a person dies? If you want to know what it is like to write a book, you can try to do it yourself, or you can invite an author to tell you what the experience is like. If you want to know what it is like to play tennis, you can attempt to learn the game yourself, or you can invite a serious player to describe the experience to you. But when it comes to the question of death, there is simply no one available who has experienced death from the inside to tell us what it means to die. This places significant limits on what can be said about the experience of dying and raises serious questions

about any methodology that might be used to make claims about the actual experience of death.

CULTURAL CONTEXT TODAY

When we think of death and dying today, one of the first things that comes to mind is the fact that, for the most part, death has been removed from the ordinary experience of most people in our culture. It is true that we see death over and over on the evening news reports, but it is always distant and does not involve people who are close to us.

By way of contrast, I remember the death of my paternal grandfather. He died in his apartment not far from where I now live and was surrounded by members of the family. His body was laid out in the casket, and the wake was held in the living room of the apartment. I was only in the second grade when this happened, but I can remember many of the details of the ceremony with great clarity. My father and my mother also died at home, though by this time, it had become common to hold the wake at a funeral parlor.

This is all by way of saying that until rather recently, death could well be a part of our every-day experience of human life. Dying at home surrounded by one's loved ones was possible. Today it is virtually unknown. Most people today die in hospitals or other kinds of institutions, commonly surrounded by machines, tubes, and wires. This makes it possible for doctors and nurses to observe more closely the biological, physical processes involved in dying. We probably know more about such things now than at any other period of history. But, to an unprecedented extent, this has distanced death from the experience of huge numbers of people in our culture.

This relates to a second factor in our culture; namely, the idea of conquering death through technology, with all the problems that this has created, personal, legal, and medical. Death is perceived almost as an affront to the capabilities of our highly technological culture. So the common temptation is to use whatever means are available to prolong life regardless of the eventual outcome.

THE ART OF DYING

Those familiar with medieval literature will recall something called the *ars moriendi.* This was a form of literature that emerged during the late Middle Ages. The Latin title means simply the "art of dying." Such texts were generally written by clergy as aids in dealing with death in pastoral terms. The point of such a title becomes more obvious when we recall the meaning of art in medieval culture. Art is not first of all a question of being able to paint a beautiful picture or carve an impressive statue. It is in essence the ability to do something well and effec-

tively. Thus, one spoke of the art of navigation, the art of cooking, the art of weaving, and all the mechanical arts before one spoke of the arts of language, philosophy, and theology. How does one do these things well and effectively? Thus, in a period when death for people of virtually any age was a common part of every-day life, the idea of preparing for death and of helping others to do so could surface in this form of literature.

What might this suggest for our own time and culture; a period in which death has been virtually removed from the ordinary experience of most people? We are not likely to write an *ars moriendi* today. But we can invite someone who has worked with dying people to discuss their experience with us. They can help us understand what goes on in a person as death comes near. They can explain the importance of recognizing the emotional reactions to what is going on. They can help us prepare ourselves and others. What I have in mind is the work and the case-histories in the writings of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (Kübler-Ross, 1969) and others who have worked in the area of death and dying. But even with this work now available to us, and even though the experience of ministering to such people can have an overpowering effect on those with the patient, it is important to keep in mind the religious context in which dying is experienced.

CATHOLIC TEACHING ABOUT DEATH

One of the tasks of Christian theology is to allow faith in Christ to shed light on the questions of our life. If faith should shed light on the questions of life, then surely it ought to shed light on the final question. What theology says will not remove all our problems and will not negate our human, emotional reactions to death. But it can put these in a context in which we can come to see the entire experience in a new way. Thus, the religious tradition will enable us to integrate the reality of death into a larger pattern of human life. Some of the specific elements of our tradition are the following.

1) *All human beings are subject to the law of death.* Human beings are by nature mortal. Over the centuries, theology has commonly related the experience of death to the reality of human sinfulness. In earlier times, the relation with sin was understood in terms of the paradisal gift of immortality which was lost by sin. In more recent theology, the connection with sin is seen as a change in the way we experience death. We experience death differently because human sinfulness has distorted our relations to all of reality. It is the distortion of these relations now drawn into the context of our decisive relation with God that makes death appear as dark and threatening. From this side of our historical experience, we do not know whether death is finally total annihilation,

or whether something awaits us beyond death. And if the latter, what might it be? Any answer we give to such questions springs from our faith. And it is the Christian faith that what appears as a possible threat of nothingness is in fact the condition for the realization of the fullness of life in a dimension that transcends our historical experience.

2) *With death, the human experience of historical existence comes to an end.* That is, there is a point of no-return. Mainline Roman Catholic theology has never accepted the idea of reincarnation. And so-called "near death" experiences, real as they may be, are not strictly speaking death. They may more appropriately be compared with various altered states of consciousness (Küng, 1984: 8-21). Hence, for Catholic tradition, there is something decisive involved in death. We do not get another chance.

3) *Death involves also the experience of judgment for the individual.* When we stand before God's love and glory, we will see ourselves in terms of what we might have become, and in terms of what we in fact have made of the opportunities given us in our life. In the presence of God, the truth of our own reality becomes fully clear to us. Judgment is the experience of the reality we have made of ourselves as we now stand in God's presence.

4) *To the degree that one's life-project is incomplete at the time of death, this must be remedied in some way.* This is commonly dealt with in terms of some process of purgation. Earlier generations thought of this as going to a particular place for a specific time. It is more common today to think of purgation as an element involved in the very process of dying itself. If in life we have built up many forms of resistance to the requirements of love, we will find the final encounter with divine love difficult and painful; for it will mean breaking out of the limits with which we have shielded ourselves from the demands of love during our life.

5) *Those who pass over into heavenly fulfillment are not isolated from those who remain on earth.* They remain in communion and can have beneficial effects on those still on earth. Hence, the Creed speaks of the communion of saints to underscore the conviction that human relations transcend the limits of our historical experience.

6) *It is Roman Catholic teaching that individuals have the ability to definitively frustrate the point of their existence.* That is, they can die resisting the offer of God's love, choosing isolation rather than loving communion with others and with God. This possibility is expressed with the symbol of hell. The Catholic tradition sees this possibility as an implication of its understanding of human freedom.

7) *Christian understanding of death looks both to the death of Christ on the cross and to the divine vindication of Christ in the resurrection.* From this perspective, death should be approached with the Christian sense of hope for definitive life with God which is highlighted in the mystery of the resurrection.

CLINICAL REFLECTIONS

This theological material should be viewed in relation to the sort of insights involved in the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and others. Kübler-Ross describes the stages through which a dying person commonly goes. These are not necessarily in a strictly chronological order, nor do all patients go through all of them. But they range from initial denial, to anger, to bargaining, to depression, to acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969: 34–121). What stands out in this body of material is the importance of those who are with the patient, and the quality of their response to what is going on. One cannot read such material extensively without becoming quite convinced that, even when external signs may be lacking, there may be much going on in the dying person, certainly up to the last moment of life.

After Kübler-Ross has discussed these stages of reaction, she goes on to discuss the role of hope throughout the entire experience. At one level, there may simply be hope that there will be a cure for the illness; if not tomorrow, then next week, or sometime in the future (Kübler-Ross, 1969: 123). But when we view this from a theological perspective, we recognize that there may be hope at quite a different level. This is the Christian hope for a life that transcends death. Such a hope, which is basic to Christian faith, provides the possibility of integrating all that is happening into a meaningful framework.

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS

Is it possible to say anything beyond this? What precisely happens when a person dies? As long as we stand on this side of death, we do not really know. And when we have died, we do not come back to tell others about it. Even the material just discussed takes us up to the moment of death, but does not enter into the act of dying itself. What it suggests is that the dying person is personally engaged in what is happening even when there are no obvious external symptoms to suggest that. This all assumes that near-death experiences are not the same as death itself.

Theologian Karl Rahner has approached the issue from quite a different perspective. He views the experience of death in relation to the quality of human life. For human beings, dying is not simpy a biological event. It is above all a human experience unlike the death of other life forms.

Human life, he argues, is at its core a search for meaning. And the historical quest for meaning is carried out in an ongoing dialectic of passivity and activity. We are confronted by others—people and things—constantly during our life, and in this sense we are passive; we are acted on. But we also actively respond to our encounter with the other.

Passivity really begins with our personal origins. We are not consulted; we are not asked whether we would like to be. In a sense, existence is something that is done to us without our prior consultation. Obviously it is done to us by our parents, and by a family history. But even more basically, it is done to us by a mystery over which we have no control. Existence is first of all a gift of a loving, creative God who calls us into being. It is the Christian understanding of creation that enables us to look at the fact of our existence and to see it as a gift and a grace. All this is intimated in the language of passivity. Existence in this sense is done to us.

But then we are capable of taking up the existence that has been given to us and of shaping it through our personal, free, active response. This we do in many little, day-by-day projects with which we fill our existence with some sense of meaning and purpose. This is the history of our personal freedom through which our lives can become ever more open and enriched by the presence of others; or ever more closed up and self-centered in an effort to keep the others out of our life. Thus, our entire history is one of being acted on and of reacting in freedom. And as each little project is completed we reach to another project to maintain the sense of meaning.

But finally, the question of meaning is confronted with the reality of death. There, again, something momentous will be done to us. From this side, it is not clear what awaits us. Is death the doorway to nothingness and annihilation; or is it the point of passage to the ultimate fullness of life that Christians name heaven? From our place in history, we can never know the answer. But clearly, something of ultimate significance is being done to us. Speaking of this, Rahner writes:

> The mysterious interplay between action and passion in the exercise of human freedom appears above all in the fact that it is precisely at the very point at which the person freely achieves its own perfection that the person is, at the same time, most wholly subject to the control by another (Rahner, 1971: 290).

What is crucial is the way the person responds to that.

It is Rahner's understanding that the whole of our life in freedom is marked by the "little death" of our daily encounter with the things that are done to us and the limits placed on us by the people who enter into our lives. In this sense, all such experiences can be seen as a rehearsal

for the moment of death. What we know as death at the end is the high-point in the dialectic of passivity and activity that has marked the whole of our human existence from the start. In Rahner's own words:

> The ultimate act of freedom in which one decides one's own fate totally and irrevocably, is the act in which one either willingly accepts or definitively rebels against one's own utter impotence, in which one is utterly subject to the control of a mystery which cannot be expressed—that mystery which we call God (Rahner 1971: 290).

The act of dying, then, is the ultimate act of human freedom; and it must be approached with a deep sense of trust and hope and with the readiness to surrender oneself to that unknown mystery.

Both the empirically based work of Kübler-Ross and the philosophical analysis of Rahner point, from different perspectives, to the conviction that the dying person is personally engaged in the experience of death. Dying is not simply something that happens to a person from the outside. Both perspectives indicate that the presence of others during the process of dying, and the manner of their presence can be of great significance to the dying person. What are the needs of the spirit? How should we attend to these needs? Kübler-Ross writes about her own book:

> If this book serves no other purpose but to sensitize family members of terminally ill patients and hospital personnel to the implicit communications of dying patients, then it has fulfilled its task (Kübler-Ross, 1969: 126).

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

Not so long ago, the understanding of care of the sick and dying for the priest would have involved principally a pastoral visit and providing the last sacraments. Not much more was expected. The material we have just discussed would suggest that quite a bit more should be involved both for the person approaching death and for the family and friends as they gather around the dying person.

Every form of ministry to the dying should stand under the sign of Christian hope. This means that it is, in essence, a way of preparing the person for a successful journey home, for the Christian believes that death is not an opening into a void or annihilation but rather a passage either into that ultimate isolation which Christian theology knows as hell, or into the fullness of life with God that Christians see when they look at the mystery of the resurrection of Christ. In the event that one is not fully prepared for the immediate experience of God, some form of purification will be involved in making this passage.

Ministry in this context will recognize that faith does not remove the darkness and fear that accompanies death when we approach it from our historical situation. The minister must allow both the patient and the friends and family to move through the various stages described by Kübler-Ross. Ministry should respect the dignity of the dying person, and should be willing to meet the patient precisely as a person with all his or her personal fears, hopes, and needs. The crucial factor is that the minister aid the dying person to encounter death with the sense of a full surrender of self to God.

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