

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*Jesus tells us in the gospel that we must die to ourselves, and that anyone who wishes to save his life must lose it.*

*Michael Pakaluk gives a reflection that might guide some understanding of Jesus' teaching on death.*

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## **The Four Deaths**

*Michael Pakaluk*

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**All of us face multiple “deaths,” even before we depart this life, and we’ll do better if we willingly embrace them.**

**Our Lord shows the way.** Yes, famously, His human nature recoiled from the harsh tortures of the Cross, when He asked in the garden whether the cup might pass from Him. (Lk 22:42) And yet, as St. Alphonsus Liguori points out in his *Passion and the Death of Jesus Christ* <sup>[1]</sup>, Jesus went to the garden despite knowing it would begin His Passion:

So great was the desire of Jesus to suffer for us, that in the night preceding his death he not only went of his own will into the garden, where he knew that the Jews would come and take him, but, knowing that Judas the traitor was already near at hand with the company of soldiers, he said to his disciples, *Arise, let us go; behold he that will betray Me is at hand.* (Mk. 14:42) He would even go himself to meet them.

Anyone who did not *want* to die would have avoided the garden in the first place and, upon hearing the soldiers, would have escaped, as His disciples soon did.

**This willingness to die for us was a note of the Lord's whole life**, St. Alphonsus observes, citing “With desire have I desired to eat this pasch with you.” (Lk 22:15) The Apostle Thomas responds, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (Jn 11:16) Whether the remark is heartfelt or, as some have thought, sarcastic, either way it testifies to Our Lord's evident keenness.

**Philosophers have long debated whether courage is absence of fear or holding fast despite fears. Jesus's example seems to teach something else: it is feeling proportionate fear, but then, when it is clear that one must die, embracing death willingly.**

**Now, a coward dies a thousand deaths. But a Christian must die four.**



**The first is baptism.** If you were baptized as a child, understand that you live now having been pledged as dead by someone else, as if you had been Isaac, brought to the sacrificial altar by Abraham. That deed is done and cannot be undone. But we can be cowards by pretending it has no implications – by pretending that, say, our time and talents belong to us. Pope Francis has encouraged all Christians <sup>[2]</sup> to learn the date of their infant baptism and commemorate it as a death and rebirth.

After my son John Henry's baptism, one of the older children commented in the car afterwards, with relief, "It's really great, Dad, that he didn't die." It wasn't that, as a child, he took the truth of "death in baptism" too seriously; it's rather that we adults hardly take it seriously enough.

**The second death is in the embrace of one's vocation, to marriage or a single life devoted to God.** When St. John Paul II wrote in *Familiaris Consortio* (n. 56) that marriage "takes up again and makes specific the sanctifying grace of baptism," the necessary death to self in marriage is a large part of what he meant.

The couple as they leave the altar on their wedding day must be different from the individuals who approached it, with the difference of death and life.

When my daughter Maria was to be married, with Fr. Paul Scalia presiding, Maria's former pastor (who was concelebrating) left a voice message with Fr. Scalia saying he would arrive just fifteen minutes before "the funeral." Did he misspeak – or rather did he prophesy? Fr. Scalia

turned the remark into a homily that both wife and husband must truly accept death to self in getting married.

**It's easy to overlook the demanding truth that man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."** (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 24) It can sound so. . ."60s." Yet that gift, and therefore "finding oneself," is impossible without dying.

**The third death is welcoming the child.** One may suspect that many couples find it difficult to be open to receiving a child because they were first not adept at the art of living as "the practice of death" (as Socrates called it – [Phaedo, 64a](#) <sup>[3]</sup> ). It is well known that many couples experience the birth of their first child as the devastation and destruction of their lives; their "happiness" declines. [Research indicates that women contemplating an abortion view keeping the baby](#) <sup>[4]</sup> as implying a death. Some of us may be tempted to deride such reactions as childish and foolish. And yet they contain more than a grain of truth. **We recognize that parents should be prepared to die for the sake of their children; therefore, virtually and intentionally, they already have died from the first moment they welcome a child.**

**None of these three deaths is strictly necessary. It's open to us to flee from the meaning of our baptism, or to live a perpetual adolescence, or to interpret marriage (à la Justice Kennedy) as perpetual dating.** But neither was redeeming the world strictly necessary. There is a necessity of fact, and a necessity within love: only from the viewpoint from which we see a wrecked Creation, and feel pity for abandoned

man (*philanthropia*, as St. Athanasius called it [5]) can the redemption begin to appear “necessary.”

But it’s useful, once one comes to grip with a necessary death, to embrace it. **As for that fourth death** – which is necessary as a matter of fact – St. Alphonsus proposes a new motive for it: **“Thou didst become a man in order that Thou mayest have a life to devote to me; I would fain have a thousand lives, in order that I may sacrifice them all for thee.”**

Although we do not have a thousand, **we have three lives to give now, and then, after the fourth, an eternity of life for giving thanks.** Well then, “Let’s roll!” – let’s get on with it.

Image: *The Ointment of the Magdalene* [6] (Le parfum de Madeleine) by James Tissot, c. 1900 [Brooklyn Museum]

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**Robert Royal’s** *Did Jesus Conquer Death?* [8]



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*available.*