

A Good Death

By [David W. Fagerberg](#) OCTOBER 30, 2022

In these days of All Hallows Eve, All Saints, and All Souls, religious people are among the few who still talk openly about death. And the theologians of “abnegation,” whom I have been reading lately, speak about it in a way that was new to me.

For the world, says Edward Leen, the important thing is to manage well the business of earning our livelihood, and only after that does one worry about one’s soul:

The business of saving one’s soul is regarded as a matter of a periodical clean-up, and a final snatching of the sacraments before dying. Of course this is something, and God, in His goodness and mercy, accepts even this little measure of good will. . . .But it is certainly not God’s idea of what a human life should be, or what a good death is. A death of this kind of a stumbling into, not the opening of, a door into eternity. To stumble into a house is not a mode of entrance that is very becoming.

So how should we enter the house of Heaven? How should we die? Death is an act, an event, an opportunity won or lost. How one “makes his death” is something to be judged.

Death is the great, decisive moment of salvation or damnation. (Liguori) In the space of a few hours, the soul will reach either eternal life or death. (Louis of Granada) Death will endow a person with everlasting consequences. (Fenelon). Eternity depends upon death, so choose wisely. Only one trial (one death) is accorded you, so prepare.

Since death is the final act of our lives, it’s the chief act of our lives, and should be treated with due seriousness. Challoner speaks for all when he says **“The great business of our whole life is to secure this happy eternity; and nothing else can secure it but a good death. This is the necessary gate,**

through which we must pass to eternal life: if we think of arriving at it by any other way, we shall miss the road. A good death, then, must be the study and business of our whole life: our whole life ought to be a preparation for it.”

What is a good death? A dying in friendship with God. Saint-Jure connects the moment of death to the past life by wondering how a wicked man could “receive from God the inestimable favor of dying in His friendship after having lived as His enemy?” Therefore, the tradition generally concludes that a good death is not produced by a bad life.



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But the possibility of a *deathbed penitent* must be interwoven into everything we have said so far, and few authors have dealt more hopefully with the deathbed than Frederick Faber. A whirlwind of activity occurs at the deathbed.

Every Christian deathbed is a world, a complete world, of graces, interferences, compensations, lights, struggles, victories, supernatural gestures, and the action of grand spiritual laws. Each deathbed, explained to us as God could explain it, would be in itself an entire science of God, a summa of the most delicate theology. The varieties of grace in the individual soul are so many infinities of the one infinite life of God. The world of grace is truly the theatre of His risible miracles.

In another key text, he explains how **time is baffled by the presence of God**: “Our ignorance of the last inward processes of death-beds leaves one of the most spacious portions of our lives inaccessible to our notice. Life is not counted only by material time. The world, and all its sights and sounds, too often leave little room for God in the hearts of men. But **the hour of death is very spacious. It gives God room. It turns minutes into years.**”

This hour of truth operates under wider and larger laws, and Faber admits we know very little of what goes on then.

It is an invisible world. “O how much of the beauty of God’s love is gathered round the dying bed, how much more than we can see, how much more than we believe! We grant that it is unknown ground; but because mercy is so much needed then. . .and finally because God is such a God as we know Him well to be, we boldly claim all that unknown land of Catholic deathbeds for the simple sovereignty of the divine compassion. **That hour may explain many inexplicable salvations.**”

The demons are drawn to the deathbed because it is their last chance to harass the servant of the Lord: “It is their last chance with the departing soul. If alas! he has been their willing prey for years. . .yet they are not quite secure. Some great compassion of Jesus, some vehement prayer of Mary, some strong sacrament, may break in upon the circle

of evil which they fancy they have traced around their victim.”

The blood of Jesus may triumph at the last, and bring forth supernatural acts of repentance, fear, and love, by which the dying soul is reunited to God. Salvation could be secured, so the demons dare not absent themselves.

In spiritual matters, there are always two worlds: the visible and the invisible. So here, “In many cases the deathbed is thus a double one. **There is the deathbed, with the priest, the physician, and the friends, around the ailing creature; and there is the same deathbed in an inner room, where the Father of all creatures is alone with His child, in communications too intimate ever to be disclosed to living ear.**”

The world has cloaked its fear of death by offering its definition of a good death: the literal meaning of *eu* (good) *thanasia* (death). They mean a death that is not painful, or inconvenient, or unplanned, or unpleasant. The Church has a different idea about what is a good death.



***Image:** *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* by John McCrady, 1937 [St. Louis Art Museum]

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