

The Virtues for Dying Well

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*With the *Ars Moriendi* tradition, we should focus on the paradigmatic significance of the death of Jesus in order to learn how to die well. We would learn faith, hope, patient love, humility, serenity, and courage as we commend our lives and our deaths into the hands of a living God.*

Ask typical Americans how they would prefer to die and they are likely to say quickly, painlessly, and in their sleep – that is, if they have even given much thought to their own death. For many, Christian or not, the thought of dying under the fluorescent lights of a sterile ICU, hooked up to countless machines, is the stuff of nightmares. This lingering and dehumanizing process is instinctively understood as a bad way to die, but often we do not have the imagination to offer a robust alternative. So we try to avoid the process of dying altogether, preferring either an unconscious demise or, as some recent polls indicate, a quick and controlled death through physician-assisted suicide. If we are honest with ourselves, however, we recognize that this escapist impulse does not serve us very well. A good death, if any death can truly be called good, occurs when one dies at peace with others and with God, and this peace is hard to find in the modern ICU or in sudden deaths. Modern medicine's emphasis on technological progress and patient autonomy offers little in the way of fostering this kind of peaceful death.¹

In order to find resources for a good death, Christians can learn from the riches of their tradition. In particular, we can turn to the fifteenth century and to the *Ars Moriendi*, a self-help handbook for dying well in an age filled with the specter of death. Numerous editions of this small pamphlet were published and read widely.² This literature did Christians a great service,

for it identified the process of dying as suffused with theological and moral significance, not simply as a medical event. Viewed in this light, death is something that we can and should prepare for as part of a faithful life of discipleship. *Ars Moriendi* assisted in this process by naming the temptations that the dying would face, and it recommended particular virtues to combat these evil inclinations. In intricate woodblock carvings, these scenes of temptation and their corresponding virtues for dying well were visually rendered. Moreover, the *Ars Moriendi* literature emphasized the paradigmatic significance of the story of Jesus, and it couched the process of dying within the community of faith. By reading these texts and meditating on their images, Christians could begin the process of preparing to die well, a process that should begin well before death is imminent.³

However, the *Ars Moriendi* literature is not without its problems. Assuming a Platonic dualism, it commends death as the liberation of the immortal soul from the body. Because of this, it disparages the “carnal relations” of embodied and communal life and so has no place for lament. This emphasis in *Ars Moriendi* could lead to forms of alienation not unlike those in modern medicalized dying. Therefore, a retrieval of the late medieval *Ars Moriendi* cannot include a dualistic commendation of death, but must instead begin with a holistic commendation of life.

TOWARDS A CONTEMPORARY *ARS MORIENDI*

We would do well to follow the *Ars Moriendi* tradition and focus on the paradigmatic significance of the death of Jesus in order to learn how to die well. In doing so, we will find the clues to overcome the greatest flaw in that tradition, its commendation of death. This is because attention to the death of Jesus demands attention to his life and resurrection. His life began with the incarnation, as the Word of God took on flesh in a fundamental affirmation of human existence. “All things came into being through him,” proclaims the beginning of the Gospel of John, and “in him was life” (John 1:3-4). The same triune God who created all of life and proclaimed it very good was present in every moment of Jesus’ life. As Jesus announced that the good future of God was at hand, he proclaimed that the cause of God was, is, and ever will be abundant life. So if we disconnect the story of his dying from the story of his birth and his ministry, we risk disconnecting the passion story from Jesus’ passion for the reign of God. Similarly, focusing on the death of Jesus distorts his story if we forget the resurrection. The resurrection is not a commendation of death, but is instead a celebration of God’s love and power, the love that is stronger than death, the power that defeated death. Therefore, attending to the story of Jesus means that we will begin with a commendation of life. His birth, life, death, and resurrection all point toward the cause of God being life, not death.⁴

With this understanding of the story of Jesus in mind, we are now prepared to appropriate the virtues for dying well given by the *Ars Moriendi*

literature. Each of the virtues given corresponds to a temptation faced by the dying, starting with the first – the temptation to lose faith. In the agony and loneliness of dying, faith in God can seem to be a difficult, if not impossible, prospect. During these darkest moments, *Ars Moriendi* is right to turn our gaze toward the faith of Jesus, who displayed his trust in God and God’s cause even unto death. It is important to observe that Jesus is not just an example of faith; in our living and in our dying, Christians can have faith because of his faithfulness. But his faith is paradigmatic for a Christian’s dying well. In Jesus’ faithful death, we see that the practice of lament is not opposed to faith. Indeed, his words from the cross demonstrate that the psalms of lament are resources for all who follow him. From his cry of dereliction (Psalm 22:1) to his final words, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Psalm 31:5), the psalms of lament are part of Jesus’ faithful death. Moreover, faith in God meant that Jesus valued God’s cause over his own life. Although a contemporary *Ars Moriendi* should begin with a commendation of life, not death, it is important to remember that though life is a great good, it is not the greatest good. Desperately clinging to one’s own survival is not the kind of life God commends. To die well, no less than to live well, one has to care about life, but some things must be cared for more than survival. Even though God’s cause seems to be thwarted by the powers of sin and death, we can follow Jesus and know that life, not death, will have the final word. God vindicated the faithfulness of Jesus in the resurrection, and because he was raised, we look to Jesus as “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2) and to his faith as the paradigm for our living and our dying.

The second temptation faced by the dying is to despair, and it is met by the virtue of hope. Death threatens not just an end to one’s existence but the unraveling of meaning, the severing of relationships, the shattering of hopes. In the shadow of death, hope seems like folly. But the God of Ezekiel who promised to make a valley of dry bones live is the God of Jesus Christ, and the hope of Jesus in the face of death is our hope. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has given us grounds to hope that death will not have the last word in our world or upon our lives. Christians do not deny the awful reality of death, but they do insist that death will not have the last word, that the last word belongs to God, and it is not death but life, not suffering but *shalom*. With faith in God they share the hope of the Church and of its creed. The Apostles’ Creed, for example, closes with these words of hope: “I believe...in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” This hope, like the creed, is Trinitarian. Christians hope because they know the faithfulness of the one who made all things, because they know the story of one who was raised from the dead, and because they know a life-giving Spirit.⁵ And because this hope must be fitting to the story given in Scripture, it should not shrink to an egocentric desire for a solitary individual to experience the bliss of heaven. Instead, the scope of Christian hope is nothing less than cosmic. The story begins with the creation of all

things and it reaches finally to all things made new. And in light of this cosmic scope, Christian hope is also inalienably personal. The same Son of God who ordered all of creation spoke words of hope to the thief on the cross. As with faith, Jesus' words from the cross remind us that Christian hope also makes room for lament, as we decry the ways in which God's good future is still sadly not yet. Therefore, in Jesus' dying, Christians find the paradigm of hope: a hope that need not cling desperately to life, a hope that makes room for lament, a hope grounded in the steadfast love of God.

The *Ars Moriendi* literature names the third temptation for the dying as impatience, and it is met by the virtues of love and patience. The great pain and suffering that can accompany dying makes patience difficult in the smallest of things. The daily care received from doctors, nurses, and loved ones can be spurned, and this impatience in the face of death receives its most terrible expression in suicide. *Ars Moriendi* is right to connect this impatience to a lack of charity, as the threat of death often makes it difficult for us to love God and the good things of God (including our own life). However, where the *Ars Moriendi* literature focuses on how to overcome, or at least ignore, temporal and bodily suffering through an escapist love of God, a better understanding of the virtue of love has no room for spurning our "carnal relations." Instead, by loving God and all else as it relates to God, we learn to properly love our bodies, our lives, and the innumerable relationships that define who we are. Because of this, there is room to lament when death threatens these loves. By participating in God's steadfast love as revealed in the passion of Christ, Christians can learn what it means for love to be patient as it endures all things. Jesus' commitment to God and God's cause above all else meant that he was willing to suffer unto death, but this display of love's patience is not a glorification of suffering. Instead, Jesus endured the cross because of his love for God and all of

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God's creation. Though it is generally discussed in terms of cosmic reconciliation, Jesus' patient love is also seen in his longing for the companionship of the disciples and his instructions to the beloved disciple to care for his mother and to his mother to care for John. We can participate in this affective affirmation of the other by offering gracious and generous attention to the needs of others even as we are dying. The work of patient love can also take

form in instruments as prosaic as a will and instructions for one's care as one is withering and dying. In all these ways, then, we can learn patient love from the one who loved us from birth to death, and we can trust that love through its affirmation in the resurrection.

After meditating on the virtues of faith, hope, and patient love, the dying may begin to congratulate themselves on how well they are doing. Just at this moment they fall into a diabolically clever temptation: the danger of pride. Pride is a difficult thing to face, especially in a culture that promotes autonomy and independence. Any effort to resist it through one's own efforts can feed into the very problem one is attempting to overcome, lending credence to the illusion of self-reliance. Instead, *Ars Moriendi* instructs the dying to inculcate the virtue of humility, found not by focusing on one's own efforts but instead through fixing one's gaze on the grace of God. This grace is embodied in the humility of Jesus Christ, who "emptied himself" in the incarnation and "humbled himself" in a life of obedience that led to the cross (Philippians 2:5-8). In humble faithfulness Christ was willing to endure humiliation and even allowed others to care for him in the midst of it. This can be a word of comfort to those who depend on others to change their bedpans and bathe their failing bodies.⁶ By attending to God and the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, we can begin to learn humility. Attentive to God, we can acknowledge our neediness and no longer fear it. Attentive to the grace of God, we need not pretend that it is our little righteousness that makes us worthy of God's care (or anyone else's); we can learn to receive care graciously. Attentive to God's power, that exalted the crucified and humiliated Jesus (Philippians 2:9), we can even cope with the humiliation of dying. Attentive to God, we need not anxiously hoard the little resources we think we have against our vulnerability to suffering and death; we can be a little less anxious, a little more carefree.

This freedom from the anxiety that prompts us to hoard the resources we think we have against our vulnerability to suffering and death brings us to the final temptation named in *Ars Moriendi*, the temptation of avarice. This temptation manifests itself in an anxious, tightfisted grasping, a desperate and idolatrous clinging to life above all else. We hardly know how to name the corresponding virtue, and intermittently call it the virtue of letting go, of serenity, and of generosity. This virtue is both endorsed and embodied by Jesus, who told us to observe the example of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:25-34) and who displayed this virtue on the cross. Without commending death, he was able to face it without fear because he was confident in the grace of God, and this confidence was confirmed in his resurrection. Therefore, even at the limits of our lives, we need not be anxious, for we may know that God's love is stronger than death. In that confidence we may let ourselves go into the hands of God. We may let go also of those we love and must leave behind, confident of God's care for them. Dying well and faithfully will mean commending them into the

hands of a God who can be trusted. This virtue does not mean that we hold our lives and our loved ones in contempt, but instead calls us to give them over to God after a life filled with loving them faithfully. In this way, our living and our dying are brought under the lordship of the one who lived and died for us.

All of these virtues – faithfulness, hope, a love that is patient, humility, and serenity – finally support another virtue, namely, courage in the face of death. We may learn the courage we need in the face of death from the death of Jesus. His faithfulness was on display in his steady and heroic fidelity to God and to the cause of God, even when it was clear that it would end in death. He knew that there are some goods more important than survival, some duties more compelling than the preservation of one's own life. His confidence that God would display faithfulness and finally establish the good future that he had announced nurtured and sustained his courage. His self-giving and forgiving love was the very image of the Father's love, and the model for those who would follow him. That love was patient, not indifferent. He acknowledged his dependence upon a God who could be trusted. Like the God he trusted, he was slow to anger and quick to forgive. Without celebrating suffering, he was ready to suffer with others, ready to share the human cry of lament. Without celebrating death, he courageously endured even dying for the sake of God's cause, the neighbor's good, and his own integrity. That love was humble. Though he was master and lord, he was among us as one who served. He trusted the God who could make the last first, who

promised to exalt the humble. His humility enabled him to endure with courage even the humiliation of the cross. His confidence in God allowed him, in the midst of lament, still to let himself go into the hands of God. Perhaps that "letting go" was the greatest display of his courage.

We are not Jesus. Our deaths do not have the cosmic significance that his did. Still, the *Ars Moriendi*

had it right: by remembering Jesus and his dying, we may find a paradigm for dying well and faithfully. We find and follow that paradigm, however, only in the light of the resurrection. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God won the victory over death. This is no commendation of death. The *Ars Moriendi* went badly wrong when it made death a good. We live and die with the confidence that death will not have the last word. God's victory

The final temptation named in *Ars Moriendi* is avarice, which manifests in an anxious, tightfisted grasping, a desperate and idolatrous clinging to life above all else. The corresponding virtue might be called letting go, serenity, or generosity.

over death has robbed death of its sting and of its terrors. The resurrection assures us that we will not finally be alienated from our flesh or from the community, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It is that assurance that nurtures our own courage in the face of death. It nurtures the faithful readiness to acknowledge that at the end of life and at the limits of human power God can still be trusted. Precisely because death will not have the last word, we need not always resist it. And because the triumph over death is finally not a technological victory, but a divine victory, we will resist not only the commendation of death but also the medicalization of dying.

LEARNING THE *ARS MORIENDI* IN THE CHURCH

Dying well in America is hard work – and American Christianity has not helped much. By accepting the medicalization of death, Christians learn to ship off their dying to hospital beds and ICU units, abandoning them to the medical experts under the guise of promoting professional help. While many of the advances of modern medical care are to be applauded, this privatization of death is a terrible force that must be resisted. Simply put, we are not meant to die alone. We must learn what it means to live *and* to die together as fellow Christians. In doing so, we begin with a seemingly straightforward task, to visit the sick and dying. However, when done well, this practice is an act of political witness that disrupts the cruel collusion of the privatization of death and religious belief. By transforming death and dying into public acts, we open up space for further practices of the Church to begin stitching together the dismembered body of Christ through the healing power of the Spirit.

Congregations and their practices can form our imagination and habits while we are healthy so that, when we are dying, we may die well and faithfully. As we have already noted, central among these practices is gathering together as the body of Christ, and this gathering occurs both in the church building and around the bedside of the dying. We gather as a community formed by the practice of reading Scripture, which teaches us to remember the story of Jesus in the ways we have described above. We gather as a praying community that can discern when it is fitting to invoke, confess, praise, petition, and lament to God, knowing through the psalmists that prayer takes a variety of faithful forms. We gather as a community shaped by the sacraments, baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, eating the bread of life even as our bodies waste away. Having gathered as the Church in these ways, we continue to faithfully prepare to die through the practices of mourning and comforting, the practice of funerals, and the practice of remembering the saints. These gathered communities learn to proclaim Christ as Lord in all aspects of living and dying, and this may mean offering workshops at church about the writing of advanced directives for health care. This proclamation will certainly involve lifelong catechesis concerning death and dying, with continued moral discourse and communal discernment

concerning the ways people die and care for the dying. In all these ways, we open ourselves up to the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us what it means to live and die faithfully as people claimed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In so doing, we may begin to learn the virtues of faith, hope, patient love, humility, serenity, and courage as we commend our lives and our deaths into the hands of a living God.⁷

NOTES

1 The modern hospice movement, as started by Dame Cicely Saunders, is a very visible and viable alternative. In many ways, it hearkens back to the premodern *ars moriendi* described in this article.

2 Many of the English *Ars Moriendi* texts are conveniently compiled in an anthology edited by David William Atkinson, *The English Ars Moriendi, Renaissance and Baroque Studies and Texts*, 5 (New York: Peter Lang, 1992). The text considered in this paper is part of a much larger genre compiled by Atkinson.

3 In fact, this preparation begins with the moment of baptism.

4 Similarly, Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God and his resurrection draw together two strands in the story of Israel, as seen in the prophetic and apocalyptic literature.

5 Therefore, Christian hope is not fundamentally grounded in the immortality of the soul, but instead looks to the faithful presence and activity of the triune God.

6 It is important to note that the humility of Jesus and his humiliation are two separate things. His humility came through steadfast, faithful obedience to God, and only in a fallen world bent towards death does that lead to the humiliation of the cross. Similarly, the humiliation that is experienced by the dying is not a necessary prerequisite of humility, but is instead a postlapsarian reality. Through humble obedience this humiliation can be (though it is not necessarily) endured faithfully.

7 In this article we borrow and adapt material from Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), especially chapter 13, "The Virtues for Dying Well."



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