

importance of the modern catechetical movement lies in the fact that it understands that the problem has this dual nature. Throughout Fr Hofinger's book you can see the influence of the *Lumen Vitae* movement. It is not my business here to give an account of the growth of this movement. I only wish to indicate that its influence is already making itself felt in educational circles in this country, and that it publishes an excellent quarterly review in English dealing with precisely these scriptural, sociological and psychological problems which lie at the heart of modern catechetics.<sup>6</sup> Until our present system adjusts itself to this new movement, teachers will always be labouring under very great difficulties. But there is much that can be done meanwhile. There is an urgent need for more books on scripture written in an imaginative theological style. A series of investigations into scripture from particular catechism dogmas, starting at a profoundly human point, and developing the themes in the scriptural rhythms is just the sort of book teachers should be given. The vital point in this scheme is the ability of the individual teacher to enter into the life and thought of scripture. And that, after all, is what all Christians should be doing.

<sup>6</sup>*Lumen Vitae*. A quarterly review, edited by the International Centre for Studies in Religious Education. English edition from Duckett, 35s.

## The Death of a Christian—I: The Objective Fact<sup>1</sup>

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Throughout the course of the growing development of the kingdom of God, the death of a Christian has taken a well-defined and important place. The ending of the earthly life of a Christian man is an essential phase in the coming of the kingdom of God. What I propose to do in

<sup>1</sup>Although translations are not normally included in LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, our readers may be interested to read this work of one of the foremost continental theologians. It originally appeared in *Kultuurleven* vol. 22 (1955) pp. 421-430 and pp. 508-519.

these articles is to analyse the meaning of this phase placed in the whole of Christian eschatology or expectation of the future. I shall first examine death as an objective occurrence in Christian saving history, and then in a subsequent article show how we Christians should personally experience the event of death in an eschatological attitude of mind: in other words what the answer of our life to death will be.

In the Dominican rite of interment, we sing 'let us be glad and rejoice on this wonderful day God has made, on which he has called one of our loved ones to himself'. The day of a man's death, which has already seen a flood of despair in many a human heart, the Church, in her serene eschatological optimism, calls a joyful birthday on which we see the true light of life.

But if in a Christian view of death we are to avoid the untrue and the counterfeit, then we must take into account all the real aspects that make death a complicated issue. For this reason we must first examine death from the natural point of view, according to what we can know of it by natural knowledge alone.

#### DEATH APPROACHED THROUGH PURELY NATURAL KNOWLEDGE

In itself, death is a normal and natural biological event: a necessary result either of the bodily organism wearing out, or of disease or external violence. The event is a sure indication of the limitedness of man in the earthly world. The graph of life follows a curve, coming into and disappearing from this tangible world. Death proves that man, at least corporeally, is a piece of nature, bound up in the transitoriness of the material world. Seen in this light, death is the clearest manifestation of the limitedness of the human condition. Such was the approach to death in the time of the patriarchs of the Old Testament: death was then considered a completely natural, normal and unavoidable fact in human life, the reasonably peaceful termination of a well-filled, meritorious life which must however know its coming and its going. This is the spirit behind 'remember man that dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return'. The Genesis story of Abraham's death is serenely simple: 'Abraham breathed his last in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and he was gathered to his people' (Gen. 25.8). There is in this no question at all of any reflection on the absurdity of death (revelation however is only in its initial stage). The same calmness of expression is found in the passing of other patriarchs: 'He breathed his last'; 'He drew up his feet on the bed and died' (Isaac—Gen. 35.29; Jacob—49.32). To die is simply a fact of human limitation, or, as

it says in the book of Joshua, it is 'to go the way of all the earth' (23.14). In this primitive stage of reflection on death the ideal was, as Judges says, 'to die in a good old age' (8.32). Such seems indeed to have been the first primitive wisdom of mankind concerning death. There is no explicit thought of a life continued hereafter.

When however the Jews were overcome with misery, and earthly political life became more problematical and more dramatic, they began to delve more deeply into the profound meaning of the great events of life: the agony of a mother giving birth, the problems of hard toil and sweat for sustenance, of suffering and of death. Holding to a religion which enjoyed the special leadership of the living God, the reflection of the Jewish people began to discover in death a history of the misery of the Fall that in its extent and profundity far exceeded any notion to be found in the idea of death as a mere result of the limitation of the human condition. However, within the religious reflection of Israel, there was also an implicit philosophical consideration of the facts, without which religious reflection would not have been able to bridge the gap between a purely natural notion of death and death seen immediately as a punishment for sin. We must now extract this implicit philosophizing from the religious context.

I have said that naturally speaking death is a normal, bodily, biological event: a bodily full-stop that as such does not tamper with the personal value or the soul of man or concern it directly. To be born, to grow and gradually or even brusquely to disintegrate are for a biological organism natural occurrences that pose no grave problems. Nevertheless, if we consider the death of a *man* and keep in mind the intimate oneness of man and come to the conclusion that the activity of a human person is intimately bound up with incarnation in its own bodiliness in this world, then the phenomenon of death becomes a fact that is difficult to digest, unintelligible and even absurd. Death (naturally speaking) cuts off a human personality from all its possibilities, because all the activity of a soul is directed through, and situated in the material world by means of its bodily incarnation. By the fact of the body's falling away, the soul becomes as it were inescapably confined (in contradiction of the Platonic doctrine) within its own bounds; it loses its situation, so that on purely philosophical grounds we must hold that death means a thorough cessation of activity for the whole man, a condition of spiritual lethargy and isolation. Still speaking naturally, we come to the conclusion that with death human life collapses in a complete fiasco—a senseless, absurd outcome. Because of a pointless bio-

logical occurrence, for example the opening of an artery, or a road or railway accident, the human person itself enters an existence of dreary emptiness. Something is not right; there is no proportion between the biological occurrence and the resulting solitary confinement of spiritual, personal reality which vastly surpasses the biological in worth and is in itself independent of the biological. Because of this absurdity there has arisen through the ages a whole literature of protest against death, which is either presented as a constructional error in the work of creation, or else as the end of everything—which again is contradicted by all sorts of irrepressibly strong suggestions pointing towards a person's continued existence after death by the continued life of the soul. The salutary promise that lies within the soul as something spiritual, something which rises above all that is merely bodily and throws vistas of eternity before itself, is drowned in tears shed over the unavailability of dying and in the frightened awareness that the soul must inevitably slip into oblivion. Certainly quite a number of biological factors are also at work in the uneasy fear of death: think for example of the situation in a bombardment—of the biological fear from which even animals in their instinctive efforts to preserve life do not escape. With man however, and certainly in his reflections on death, the causes of his experiencing the reaction 'it must not happen' lie much deeper than on the biological level. They are tied up with the depths of his existence as a spiritual person who along with other persons extends his personality in the world and to the world in love and justice. If we face this fact of the death of a *man* in all its rigour, and leaving aside any context of supernatural faith try to study it in purely philosophical terms, we really do land ourselves with a very thorny problem. On the natural level the death of man is indeed an absurd phenomenon, senseless and unintelligible, something that denies all the promise that man bears within himself in his earthly life and shatters all his innermost hopes. Apparently pure philosophy cannot say more about man's death. But such a philosophical judgement is crippling.

This points to the manner in which the history of the Fall and of salvation has an intimate effect on philosophy itself, and indicates too that a philosophy outside a Christian religious context must, when all is said and done, waver between two conclusions, one pointing to the significance of the existence of God, and the other, because of the absurdity of death, seeming but to make this conclusion once more problematical. For some the uncertainty will be cut through in the direction of a philosophy of absurdity which grows into 'atheistic

existentialism'. Others who do not reason away the significant indications that God exists, but who appreciate them in synthesis with the objective data of the religious experience of the whole of mankind, will look upwards from the question mark that is written at the very centre of philosophy—will look up to religion: will the problem not perhaps find its solution there? Now we as Christians know that it is precisely revelation that casts a new light on the phenomenon of death, for, as the Fathers of the Church have already noted, revelation not only makes God known to man, but also makes man known to himself.

This brings us to the second point.

#### DEATH AS A DATUM IN THE RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF FALLEN MAN

In the second phase of revelation, the post-patriarchal period from the time of Moses to the sapiential books, there is already to be found a first explanation of the phenomenon of death. The book of Wisdom says: 'For God made not death: neither has he pleasure in the destruction of the living' (1.13; see also 2.24, Ezek. 18.23, etc.). It is moreover typical that some clarification of the notion of immortality should come in the Old Testament in the same books as those in which man came to the knowledge that a religious tragedy lay at the origin of death.

Revelation here teaches that God would fulfil the promise of immortality that lies confined in the human soul in the state of grace, if man would remain 'walking with God in the Garden', as Genesis puts it; that is, if man would truly allow God to be the living God in his life. It was precisely by religious reflection on the absurdity of death that the Jews, who believed in the intelligibility of all the works of Yahweh, came to compose the Genesis story of the fall into sin. God perfected his revelation *in* this reflection. St Paul summarizes this divine revelation in the striking words: 'by one man sin entered into the world, and by sin death' (Rom. 5.12), and the Council of Trent determined that the punishment aspect of death is a dogmatic truth (Denzinger 788, 789). The absurdity of death lies in the fact that man by his own sinful fault landed himself in the situation of the Fall: in other words, man himself, by sinning, made his own situation of promise into an absurdity. The absurdity does not come from God, it is not a constructional error in creation, which as God made it was good and perfectly intelligible. Sin itself is absurd, and death is punishment for sin. Not indeed a subsequent punishment, as for example an earthly court might impose a sentence of death. Sin itself kills. Sin affects us to the very root of what

we are; it is the letting go of the living God and therefore the germ of the collapse of man. It is 'sin to death', as St John says. Death is thus the empirical, visible appearance of sin: it is the revelation, in unmistakable visible clarity, in a painful historical fact, of the living God in a sinful man; for although death is an intrinsic consequence of sin, precisely as such it is also a sanction of the just God: in other words, the rebound of God's majesty and holiness in a sinful man. Death is the visible sign of the blameworthy situation of fallen man: 'you are children of death'. And so we understand that the punishment of death includes not only the decay of the body, but also the immediate consequence of this, the empty, lonely, shut-in-upon-self existence of the separated soul. Sin in itself is an absurdity freely willed by man, which spawns its own proper consequences. The death of an innocent child, fratricide, the death of a beloved mother whose love and care is woven into the texture of the whole of life, any death at all, proves only that there is something unstuck somewhere in the world, that something is maimed—something that cannot be explained by pointing philosophically to the limitations of humanity. A *man's* death means more than just a biological event, more than just the breakdown of a heart that cannot hold out any longer. It is the own manufacture of sinful humanity. A man who in his possibly sincere pride cannot acknowledge the fact of his own sinfulness, a man who abolishes the awareness of sin from human experience cannot see any sense in death and will logically pay homage to atheism. 'God made not death', Old Testament revelation says with serene simplicity. Death is a sentence of doom that man because of his sinfulness called down upon himself and all mankind. Death is sin itself in its corporeal visible form: it is the cutting off of self from God and all his creatures in a sickly existence of reversion to self, a metaphysical confinement; 'an eternal death,' say scripture and the liturgy. The condition of a separated soul, entered upon by dying, is a just interpretation of what the religious moral phenomenon of sin is and of what it means finally to cut one's self off by denying God: sin is an act in which a man contorts himself against the objective order, inverts every thing, twists, perverts, betrays and forces all to bow to himself as to the pole of ultimate desire. The empty existence of the dead is as it were the wearied-of-life, forced inactivity of a man strung up by his own hand on the gibbet of sin, a besotten sleep without the hope of fresh dawn. *Mors aeterna*, in other words, a genuine hell. Thus sin is the manifestation in a sinful man of God's majesty and holiness

and at the same time a *mysterium iniquitatis* of diabolical and human sinfulness.<sup>2</sup>

This does not yet however bring out the definitive meaning of death. Revelation goes further and shows us how the living God himself perfected a saving mystery in that guilty and absurd experience of man.

#### DEATH AS A PHASE IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN SALVATION: CHRIST'S DEATH

Death is and remains, for the Christian too, a punishment for sin. In this sense death is and remains, for the Christian too, a terrifying machination of the devil who did not only tempt one man to his death, but all humanity, and even God himself, when he dared to become man. Nonetheless when this happened death itself entered into the kingdom of God. The last absurd scandal of the tyranny of death, the death of the man Jesus who is God, in fact brought life back to humanity, because whatever the living God touches becomes itself alive, even though it be very death.

There are people who damage or destroy everything they touch, but there are others who manage to leave everything with which they come into contact, whether it be with their hands or with their reason, with their mind or their heart, somehow changed for the better. That which seems banal and everyday becomes with them resplendent with a new fascination which most would never have dreamed it possessed. So it is in an incomparably outstanding way with the man Jesus, the God-man.

God himself, in the man Christ, has come into a humanity become absurd on account of our sins, into our humanity existing as it does in the fatal condition of the Fall. The living God, who as man had a right to unconditional immortality of the body, willed to become man in the concrete sense of the word. 'The Word was made flesh.' 'Flesh' here does not merely imply he became true man, but man in this fallen condition.

St Paul says God took upon himself the 'body of sin' (Rom. 6. 6): although sinless himself God came as man into a human existence which is marked with the sign of sin—death. St Paul dares even to say 'He was made sin for us' (2 Cor. 5. 21), not as if he himself had sinned, but

<sup>2</sup>In order not to complicate the question more than can be helped, we omit here the nevertheless important biblical revelation according to which death is a partner in covenant with the devil: death is an expression of the devil's sphere of power over earthly things (cf. Gen. 3; Wis. 2.24; Jn. 8.44; Heb. 2.14).

rather because he died our death of punishment for sin. God has undergone death itself as the foremost embodiment of sin. In stark reality the man Jesus experienced corporeal death in all its horror, the powerless emptiness of the body's end.

Christ himself bears witness to the fact that the death he died is a death for sin. For this he came into the world. It is also clear from the fact that his death was the result of the sinful intrigues of the Jews; his death was an unmitigated murder, man laying violent hands on the Son of Man. It is clear too from the words of Christ's dying prayer: 'Lord, why have you forsaken me?' He experiences death in its mysterious darkness. In his warning to the weeping women, Christ grasps at the heart of death: 'weep not for me, but for yourselves'—that is, weep not so much because of death, but rather for the soul that lives in death; weep because of sin. His death was death to sin (Rom. 6. 10).

Death is something that we men by our sins have ourselves invented. Death is truly something man-made. And this man-made thing we have given to God. We can give God many things, but all that we give him is his already. Death alone, product of man's sin, was the only thing that God did not possess. We were certainly not to be envied in our unique possession of it. Yet in the effrontery of his sinfulness man knew the bitterness of presenting death to God on the cross. God's love for us must be overpowering—that the living God should have wanted to become truly one of us men just so as to be able to accept that painful gift. For one has to be man and God and at the same time love man overwhelmingly, outrageously, to be able to accept, and lovingly to long to accept, such a wretched gift at the hands of men. But it is precisely in this that a miracle occurs, far more wonderful than the miracle of Cana. If the devil had known of it, says St Paul, he would never have allowed the Son of Man to be crucified (1 Cor. 2. 8); however, he adds, this divinely wise plan of salvation was more than the devil's powers of understanding could hope to grasp.

But how does the death of Christ give death a new meaning? We have stated the reason already: by the fact that Life, the living God, came into contact with death. Such a contact was however no automatic occurrence, like the bringing together of a positive and a negative electrode so that a spark jumps to life. Christ insisted on the fact that he was giving his life freely to the Father, out of redemptive love for man (Jn. 10. 8). His death is a sacrifice, an active self-dispossession and self-detachment for love of God—a death therefore diametrically opposed to the self-seeking of sin. Such a sacrificing love is the radical



opposite of sin. The reality we are getting at here is a religious act of the man Jesus, his total experience of God expressing itself in the giving up of his life out of a perfect appreciation of God's superiority. We are redeemed by Christ's death as a loving sacrifice, not by Christ's death as a welter of pain and suffering.<sup>3</sup>

The agony of Christ's death is not of God's doing, for here too the word of scripture is true: 'For God made not death: neither has he pleasure in the destruction of the living' (Wis. I. 13). The drama of the cross is not so much a scourge from above as the breaking through of God's merciful love into a torn and sinful world of men. It is the sinful world that makes the break-through of divine mercy in the man Jesus have the character of suffering and death. The redemption is thus the point of contact in this world between divine love descending and the fatally unsound condition of fallen man. Christ accepted death freely and for love, so that his death became the visible expression, the moment of realization, of his perfected love which in death was made indeed truly sacrificial love. That which before was the outward visibility of inward sinfulness, death, now in Christ becomes the visible manifestation of the highest possible awareness of God, the proof of God's superiority in the deed that was a total forsaking of self. Christ's death is the loving attachment of himself to God in visible abandonment, the free acceptance by a man of the terrifying abandonment of death: it is giving self over into the hands of God in the full awareness that in the supreme crisis of human life salvation can be expected only from him. 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit'. That which was the embodiment of the inward state of sin becomes in Christ the living expression of inward holiness, state of grace, and redeeming love. Thus the abandonment and the absurdity of death is intrinsically turned into an event which, though in itself crippling and as it were annihilating, nevertheless becomes the passage to an encounter with the living God: the Father in mercy receives the soul commended him. That which by itself led to the 'solitary confinement' of the soul by loss of the possibility of all natural contact with persons and things, becomes now a new life in the embrace of the life of God. The soul, cut off from the proper context of its life, lives now in a new context: it lives the very life of God. *Vita mutatur, non tollitur*. This is a pure gift of God, which will receive its full perfection in the resurrec-

<sup>3</sup>In the following article I shall show that to die as such is not an act, but something that happens to us, by which we are overcome; but further how this happening can nevertheless be taken up into an act of love.

tion of the body. It is the gift of divine life that penetrates right through to the bodily life of man.<sup>4</sup>

Death is therefore in Christ no longer a *mors aeterna*, but a provisional though decisive phase of redemption, a passage to resurrection, an ascension to true life, a birthday. 'Death, I will be your death', are the words the liturgy places on the lips of Christ on Good Friday. By his death, he destroyed death.

So by the fact that Christ, as a holy man who is God, entered lovingly into it, death has obtained a redemptive worth. Death remains a punishment for and a consequence of sin as a result of which Christ died; but the punishment now becomes reparation, satisfaction and meritorious penance. The punishment is now a constructive, salutary punishment; it receives something that of its own self it could not possess and has got only through God's merciful intervention—a positive saving worth.

We can now appreciate that as nothing escapes his providence, in the mind of God from the very beginning death was caught up into the highest plan of salvation. The absurdity of death never did exist in its own right, but only as drawn into the victory of Christ who overcame it. This is a picture of death in its objective reality. It does not yet tell how or whether *our* death, my death, can come to mean salvation. The glorious significance of our death is to be considered in the concluding article.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The resurrection must be considered in intimate unity with the Christian meaning of death, so that even death as a sacrifice of love is seen not to be the ultimate answer to the problem. The ultimate answer comes from God alone: it is resurrection.

<sup>5</sup>This will appear in the February number.