

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF DEATH: DEATH IN LIFE AND LIFE IN DEATH¹

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Allow me some preliminary comments about this lecture which is part of the Centennial Lecture Series of the College of Theology for 2004. For participating in this Series of Lectures, I am thanking the Dean, the Dr. Limuel Equiña, and not least, Pres. Dr. Juanito A. Acanto for supporting/ encouraging such an occasion for the university community.

This lecture is drawn (not simply excerpt) from a Masteral Thesis in Theology submitted in 1968 to the United Theological College, Bangalore, India, and had been graded with distinction by the Serampore University Senate in India.

The Thesis was under the Advisorship of a Syrian Orthodox priest- Theologian, who was a Ph. D. graduate of Princeton, USA.

I am dealing with the subject: "Towards A Theology of Death: Death in Life and Life in Death" under two parts, (1) An Evaluation of the Concept of Death by Three Theologians (Rahner, Berdyaev and Barth), and (2) A Positive Statement/ Reflection on Death. It goes without saying that each part carries several points. So that you will not become anxious of the length of the Lecture, and start yourself counting the points with the Lecturer in the

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process, I will not mention how many points has each part consists, but I assure you, you will not be retained here unnecessarily, in other words, against your will!

Let me start with two quotations – one from a Nobel Prize in Literature recipient; and the other, from the Servant of Servants in Rome (Servo Servorum), the Roman Pontiff: “The old ethnic tribes, e.g. Russian, Tartars, Wotjaks, made no great (fuss) affair, nor tried to oppose it (death)... they faced it with composure, and preparations were made in time... then they departed without struggle, as if they were simply to transfer to a new house”, (free translation from the German of Alexander Solschenizen’s).

The other quotation comes from Pope John XXIII, the Pope, who became famous in the Christian world and beyond, because he had called the convocation of the II Vatican Council (1963- 1965). He said, “My suitcase has been packed... I am ready.” (free translation from German).

Both quotations refer to how one faces death as a reality of life: whether it comes from the highest- ranked ecclesiastical Christian personality or whether it comes from ethnic tribes of far away lands in the Caucasus, whether Christians or those belonging to other faiths. It is reflected in these two quotations as I perceive it: preparation, readiness composure and trust- confidence in the face of this reality! But this is not however simply a question or questions of how to face death, but I suggest that we also ask the question why the Pope, on one hand; and the ethnic groups (in the Caucasus), on the other hand, could behave or have this kind of outlook or attitude and orientation in the face of death? Why was there such a “composure”, why was there such a “readiness” in the face of death, which is as real as life itself? Although, there may be examples, whose outlook could just be the opposite of what had been mentioned, there are many more examples coming from various tribes (and peoples) all over the world; or examples from

other faiths, like Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and a couple more of Chinese religions portraying or showing an outlook or attitude towards death similar to that I cited above.

And it could be that we or among us there are those who may have this or that outlook or orientation towards death, or to use the figure again from the Pope: "I have packed the suitcase... I am ready." Some of us must already have packed the suitcase, hence are ready; some may still be packing, hence not quite ready. Others may not have even started to pack any suitcase, hence nothing is ready at all! Did I make the simple figure of speech of Pope John XXIII, complicated? Not really, I simply expanded it, and may I suggest that we do not confuse the person, who packs, and his suitcase. My simple understanding is that, the Pope had made ready his life for death. In other words, he had lived his life to the full; henceforth he is ready to go! You may remember another person saying along the same vein: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Hence forth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day...II Tim 4:7-8 (KJV)." What then is death towards which we prepare in life and at every moment of life, we are confronted by it?

Section A: An Evaluation of Rahner 1904, Berdyaev 1874- 1948 and Barth 1886-1968

There are significant points about death brought out separately by Rahner, Berdyaev and Barth which now needed consideration together. These are mainly concepts on which the three theologians evidently present similar ideas. Where they differ, it will be indicated.

Man has a definite limit and end to his physical existence. This end expresses itself in death. Both Rahner and Barth hold that this genuine end of man

shows that man is really man, living in a specified time in history; a historical being, subject to history. On the other hand, Berdyaev maintains, that if there had been no death and life continues forever in this world, it would have had no meaning. Meaning is never revealed in an endless time. Only death gives true depth to the question as to the meaning of life.

Apparently, this shows that death is a normal and natural part of creation. How could it be otherwise? Life is intended to be meaningful and death gives meaning to it. Man actually lives in time – a historical being and death seals that reality. As a matter of fact, Barth claims that in a Creator-creature relationship of God and man, death is a sign which clearly defines the relationship. Death also distinguishes the Creator from the creature: the creature having always the mark of death in him, while the Creator, the Source and Goal of Life. Rahner asks whether death is not a natural consequence of the constitution of man as the unity of body and spirit. And besides, death in an individual is not merely an event coming from the outside, as it was imposed upon man. It is a human act from within, so Rahner holds, a manifestation of man's participation by faith in the destiny of the Lord.

Actually this is just one side of the nature of death. The other side is what all the three emphatically hold – death is the result of sin. They differ in their understanding of sin, but of the consequence, they are basically in agreement. Berdyaev is quite clear on this. He calls death as the most terrible and final evil that happens to man not only as a mortal being, but as a sinful mortal being in a fallen sinful world. As long as there is sin, there is to be fear – fear of judgment and the future which is death itself. Barth and Rahner are no less emphatic in connecting sin, judgment and death. Rahner believes that death which man experiences is an expression, consequence and punishment of the perdition that comes to him from the sin of Adam. It is a

visible manifestation of the punishment of the sin of man who has been estranged and alienated from God. Barth puts it even more plainly when he said that man's radical corruption merits judgment in death.

The idea of existence of the whole man ending definitively in death rules out the theory of natural immortality of the soul, on the one hand, and the concept of the cyclic return of the soul into the world in the process of reincarnation, on the other. For man, death happens only once. His death is unrepeatable and unique in significance. Rahner and Berdyaev however, offer some explanation of the nature of existence beyond death. But that can wait for a later discussion.

Death is also held by the three theologians as present throughout the whole life of man. Death should not only be understood as the last moment of life but as a reality present all through life. In other words, the life of man is filled with death and dying. It is a continuous dying and man experiences constantly the end in everything. This is borne out by the fact that man lives an existence which is guilty throughout; hence he is entangled and submerged in death all his life. To Barth for example, man is faced continuously by two choices: the gracious God, which means life and the abyss of nothingness, which means death. And because man by himself, cannot alter his guilty being, his life is already marked by its end. The threat of death does not only overshadow but also dominates his whole life. And if nevertheless, man lives in the midst of death, it is because here and now he encounters the eternal redemption in Jesus Christ. Likewise, Rahner sees the presence of death in life as man's act of fulfillment which is achieved through the whole of his life and not just an isolated point at the end of life. In other words, man enacts his death as his own consummation through the deed of his life.

The concept inevitably places life in a serious frame. It may affect a morbid feeling in man who always think of death and fear it. Hence, a life dominated by fear such as

this is never healthy. But it may also affect in man a sense of urgency towards responsibility not only for his own life but for the life of other men who are threatened by death and nothingness as well. It is an up-to-date concept which is a potent corrective to modern tendency of taking life slipshod because nothing really matters.

The final point on which the three theologians are essentially in agreement is the conviction that death is not the final word for man. For Barth, death is a defeated foe in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, death has not merely been endured but overcome. In Him, man has been delivered from sin, guilt and therefore from death. On the other hand, Rahner looks at death in the light of death of man under grace. Such death is a dying in Christ – Barth also holds the same idea – therefore it is a saving event. It is a culmination both of the reception and the effecting of the salvation of man who participates in the death of Jesus Christ through the process of dying throughout his life. This act of participation finds visible expression in the receiving of the sacrament of Baptism, the Eucharist, and Extreme Unction. Likewise with Berdyaev, man conquers death by participating in the life and death of Christ. It means, freely accepting it while he is in full communion with the source of Life. Only then can man overcome the destructive consequence of death.

Consequently, it raises the question of the resurrection. The three theologians grapple with this problem and basically come to the same conclusion: there is an 'immortality' of a difference among the three. On this question however, lies in their understanding of the nature of existence after the termination of physical life.

Barth offers no exposition about the nature of the intermediate state of the dead. He, nevertheless, rejects the idea that the dead are in the state of sleep and interprets St. Paul's word in I Thess. 4:14 – KOEMASTHAI – as simply 'to fall asleep' and not 'to be asleep.' According to him, the early Christians were not

interested in such question. What they were more concerned with and interested in was the confession of Jesus Christ: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.'

Barth is unequivocal of the Christian Hope for the future. It is the hope of the redemption in the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ. A redemption which means the resurrection of the flesh – a deliverance from death into eternal life. Beyond this, Barth does not attempt any speculative theory on the existence after death.

In Berdyaev, one sees a development of a theory. He maintains the concept of resurrection life attainable only through Jesus Christ. However, he expounds an idea of immortality in terms of an integral personality of man. Personality, for Berdyaev, is the unity of all human powers and possibilities. This is what is immortal, since it is the eternal idea of God.

He points out that a natural man does not possess the natural quality of eternal life or immortality. By implication, the whole man or the integral personality takes an immortal aspect only after it has attained a new spiritual life in the spirit. Moreover, such personality, Berdyaev claims, does not mature in this life, but reaches full maturity after death in eternity. Death, in other words, reveals its positive value by opening up for the personality of man an opportunity for a full development through an eschatological resurrection of individual body and the body of the world.

Berdyaev further maintains the concept of the solidarity of man and the world. He says that the resurrection of man is at the same time the resurrection of the body of the world; 'personal eschatology' is interlaced with 'universal and historical eschatology'. This means immortality cannot be separated from that of other men and of the world. The whole basis of the concept is love: the universal-divine-love incarnate in Jesus Christ. It is the nature of this love to desire a universal salvation from death and a universal resurrection of all. This is true.

But Berdyaev in his enthusiasm for universalism seems to have overlooked his own emphatic concept of man who can act freely and has the moral right to be free. Hence, man can choose otherwise, than to be in the scheme of universal salvation or universal resurrection. Besides, love incarnate in Jesus Christ does not force everybody to go to heaven, although it persuades all; nor force every man to be resurrected. The desire of love for universal salvation and resurrection is quite another thing from love's carrying out that desire into fulfillment by overruling the freedom of the personality of man. Man is so dependent, in fact a slave, to his society, the state and the world, but he is also independent: a king over all these. This dialectic tension in Berdyaev's thought is lost or contradicted in his own insistence on universal salvation of all men and a universal resurrection of everyone. After all, did he not claim that man has also the moral right (in freedom) to choose hell and therefore death??

Rahner, on the other hand, develops a much more elaborate theory on the question of the nature and manners of man's existence after death. He explains this in terms of pancosmic relationship. Upon this concept, he builds two other related ideas, viz. a continuous maturing or development of the personal spirit after death and a maturing process as an aspect of the punishment of venial sins in Purgatory. For Rahner, resurrection means the termination and perfection of the whole man before God who gives him 'eternal life.' And because man is a many-sided being, the process of his perfection and the entrance into such perfection is not a simple, identical quantity in every respect. The 'moment' of completion of such stratified being is not the same for every one of these dimensions. Furthermore, the personal spirit is in a pancosmic relationship with the world and therefore the end of the world is also its perfection and consummation. Rahner rejects the concept of the Second Coming of Christ as an event enacted in a localized manner of the

stage of unchanged world. He believes however, that the Second Coming takes place at the 'moment' of the perfection of the world. In such moment, the God-man will be revealed to all reality and to everyone of its parts, as the innermost secret and center of all the world and of all history.² If we follow Rahner's argument, there is not only a 'moment' of perfection of personal spirit but also 'moments', for there is not only one personal spirit but many and each being many-sided, differs from one another in their moments of fulfillment or consummation. We inevitably ask, to which of these 'moments' does the 'moment' of the perfection of the world corresponds? Will it correspond to the very last man who dies or to the very last man who perfects himself in a pancosmic relationship to the world? If the Second Coming of Christ awaits for 'a moment' of perfection of the whole universe, in order to take place then probably it will never take place. Rahner seems to minimize, if not overlook, the disintegrating forces that work as a whole. True, he insists that the end of the world will not be a sheer cessation, a 'being-no-longer' of the world itself, but the participation in the perfection of the spirit. This sounds logical, if one deals only with a moment of perfection of a spirit which corresponds to a moment of perfection of the world, but if one faces the world of personal spirits which differ in their moments of perfection from one another, one wonders whether there really would be a moment of the end with a freely achieved completion and a state of finality.

The broader base which Rahner offers the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory is to be noted. The negative purging and cleansing punishment of venial sins in Purgatory – the official Roman Catholic doctrine – becomes to Rahner, a process of maturing of the personal spirit (with venial sins in pancosmic relationship) through which all the power of the human being are integrated into the basic decision of the free person. Rahner emphasizes the

² K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. II, London, 1963, p. 312.

idea that 'remission' in Purgatory means not only purging as punishments for sins but 'remission' as development or maturing. So that when a person is released from it, he is a different being from him when he first entered into it. What seems not clear in Rahner's discussion of Purgatory is whether the whole universe with pancosmic relationship is a sort of Purgatory, where all personal spirits mature, or whether Purgatory exists as a place within the world or side by side with it, offering the same manner of relationship among its inmates, as those in the world. If the first case is true, then Purgatory as a place may not be a useful place anymore – the whole universe is there anyway where one develops and matures from his sins and disunity. If the latter is right – then what is the difference between one's maturing in the universe and in purgatory when both have similar manner of relationship and purpose? Rahner minimizes the negative aspect of punishment of venial sins in Purgatory by making it appear that one gets over it, when one matures in the process.

Section B: A Positive Statement On Death

From ancient times to the present day there has always been different attitudes towards death. The Indians and the Chinese – at least the majority of them – believe in the transmigration of the soul. A concept which maintains that when a man dies, his soul is born again in another man or in an animal in the process of reincarnation. That price of rebirth goes on – in a cycle? – until the soul is purified from its wicked deeds, each time it is born into the world. A similar belief is found among the early Roman Pagans. They held the view that their souls must pass through successive lives and death until purified from sin and stained of the body by numberless sojourns in the world. And finally by virtuous lives on earth they find satisfaction and rest. Or again from primitive-animist man, comes a psychological conclusion

that whether one likes it or not, his ghost will continue to live some kind of life after his earthy life is over. Then of course, there is the Greek classical theory of the natural immortality of the soul according to which, death is the great liberator. So long as man lives, his soul is in a prison of the body which is essentially alien to it. The body is only an outer garment which prevents the soul from moving freely and living in conformity with its proper eternal essence. Death leads the soul out of the prison of the body to its eternal home. And finally, there is the Hebrew-Christian tradition about death. According to this concept, death involves the whole man – the living soul – and not just the body. The whole man who has really died is recalled to life by a new act of creation in the Resurrection. Death is conquered and man becomes, as it were, immortal through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and through faith in Him.

Today, these ideas which are very much alive, although probably in different forms, have far-reaching influence and effect upon the whole outlook of man to life in general and to the Christian faith in particular. Two main concepts of death are worth noting here. It is from these concepts that different attitudes to life, to values and to the future, are derived. On the one hand, death is viewed – figuratively – as a ‘wall’, an ultimate personal disaster: the end of human life. On the other hand, death is regarded as a ‘doorway’, a point in time on the way to eternity: a door to another but better room. From these opposite points of view we get also corresponding attitudes of man towards his whole existence. There is, for instance, the skeptic’s acceptance of the inevitable which oftentimes leads to the repression of the thought of death by life itself. And there is also the elevation of death as something that gives meaning to life or as the precondition for the true and fuller life of man. The former finds death as the natural end of the process of life and the latter perceives death as the dissolution of bodily life and beginning of a new life.

The fact of death is to be accepted and recognized. It is probably the only thing one can be sure of in this present life. It is a reality that concerns every man: his whole life, his total personality, all his values, and his future. Therefore, it is an event of life which is of utmost seriousness, not only because it ends all human life, existence and enterprise, but also it is a reality present throughout man's life. In other words, man does not only live – if he truly lives – in anticipation of the end, when his life ceases to be and he is no more, but he lives moment by moment being confronted by death and dissolution. This no doubt, places life in a serious frame. But one may object that such life will neither be healthy nor happy. How can life be happy when it is lived under fear and terror of death? An objector proposes that death must be considered a 'blessing', a 'friend' and a 'brother'. Fear of death has no place in man's life, for it arises from a lack of trust in the love and power of God. The trouble with the whole objection is that it threatens the reality of death too naively and considers trust as absolutely exclusive terms, let alone as simple alternatives. The verdict of both Brunner and Barth on this objection is that it simply falls to face up seriously with the grim reality of death. In fact Barth goes further by saying that it is always man deceived and doubly deluded who speaks of death as though it were kindly angel of light. John Baillie shares in the verdict when he says that there could be no shallower thing than to face the partings and bereavements, dissolution and corruption in which every life is full as mere cheeriness. He further says that death is a most solemn crisis and extremity, a threshold of eternal judgment, on the brink of which all of us are standing every moment.³

Death poses as a serious event in human existence because it threatens to end all human enterprise and achievement. We can see this if we have accepted the

³ John Baillie, *And The Life Everlasting*, London, 1936, p. 284

fact that sin affected not only man in the depth of his being but also the whole of his work and achievement. In other words, there is nothing in the sphere of human activities that is spared from sin and corruption. 'For all have sinned and the wages of sin is death.'

The Kingdom of the world have come and gone, the achievements of mankind have their glory, splendor and hope, but the last two World Wars shattered all hopes about the capacity of man to build anew the Tower of Babel. The story of the Tower of Babel is not merely a legend for children's entertainment during Sunday School Days. If it teaches anything at all, it is this one truth: that man's enterprise founded on pride and arrogance – and which one is not? – ends up in destruction and dissolution. Today man benefits tremendously from his own achievements in science, technology, and education and in almost all fields of human endeavor. But it is not also true that he is threatened at the same time by the holocaust of the third nuclear world war? To deny this is to bury our head in the sand.

We can still make our problem more specific and particular. The parable of the Rich Fool recorded in St. Luke's gospel chapter 12 shows not only what real life should consist of, but also what it should not. But there is one other lesson we can derive from this parable. Man himself is not really the absolute arbiter of his life, plan, work or accomplishment. This rich man thought that after his barn became full for his plentiful harvest, he can really settle down and be at ease: eating, drinking and getting merry, because he has many years still ahead of him during which he could feel secure and be happy. It turned out to be an illusion. He was a fool to think that way, so the record says, because that very night his life was claimed from him. And what really remains was the divine question: "this night your soul is required of you: and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Lk. 12:12). As a matter of fact, that rich man has never had chance to finish his plan; much less enjoy anything that

he had. Death has the final word. Today, many examples could be cited of individuals whose plans or enterprises in life end when they themselves die. It must be clear, however, that we are not referring so much to all human enterprises treated individually. Certainly there are a number of individual enterprises and achievements that go on to benefit mankind long after the death of their founders or initiators. But it cannot be gainsaid that all these, even the most successful ones, are under the threat of dissolution and sooner or later, will end up in death and disintegration.

An extreme outlook grew out of this belief. Such attitude is discernible in humanism, which is only interested in the present life, i.e., a life of man between birth and death. It is not interested at all, much less bothered, about the question of 'immortality' or life-after-death. What is important is the life of man here and now. In fact, it sometimes raises the question whether immortality or resurrection is desirable at all. It charges that those whose eyes are fixed on the splendor of heaven are blinded to the more intimate riches of the earth and 'those whose real hopes are in eternity have always been lacking in zeal for the progress in time.'⁴ Both of these charges have the same basis of interest: the world or the earth, here and now.

We combine these charges into one and answer it in two ways. Firstly, the conclusion of the charges does not necessarily follow the premise. It is true, that from the early Church down through the ages to the present time we have people who, because they have been enamored by the vision of heaven and the assurance of eternity – in spite of the stark reality of death in between – lost their true sense of living real human life on earth. In modern terms they are usually called either 'puritans' or 'quietists.' These people are sometimes characterized – appropriately to some extent – as those who are

⁴ John Baillie, *And The Life Everlasting*, London, 1936, p. 24

confronted with their own personal salvation and spiritual growth. They have nothing to do with the world because it is evil. Or, those people who are mere spectators to what is happening in the world in its progress and development; in its suffering and failures. This tendency can be observed in both the ancient and modern Church. But it does not really prove that the 'vision of heaven' and the 'hope of eternity' make man automatically indifferent to the world or society where he lives. Nor does it necessarily make him unconcerned of his own life and his neighbor's here and now.

It is rather a distortion of what it means to live a truly human life now, under the shadow and dominance of death and at the same time having the hope of eternity. It is a tendency, or call it a movement, that resulted from rigid separation of the secular and sacred realms, which characterized the past history of the Church. The Integration, therefore, of the sacred and the secular in terms of the unity of life of the individual and his relation to all men, makes human life under the threat of disintegration and death all throughout, more meaningful and decisive. In other words, it is real life – not just a preparatory life intended for heaven – that must be lived now fully and meaningfully. A life which is concerned not only of one's own, but also of one's neighbor, the society and the world. It is a life whose concern is expressed both in words and in works, and whose awareness of its limit and boundary in death never dims, but becomes ever urgent through the passing of time.

Secondly, the attitude that immortality or resurrection life is not necessary does not really coincide with actual facts in human life when such life is confronted with death. One wonders whether this attitude is not rather a 'pleasant (?)' rationalization against a 'morbid (?)' constant thought of death. Or to put it in another figure, is this not the result of a strong preference for the riches and ornaments of Egypt than the milk and honey of the Promised Land? Baillie himself remarks that no one,

even a cad could stand by his beloved's deathbed and say (or think) that he was not interested in immortality.

Another concept related to the belief of 'immortality' or resurrection-life is the idea of human personality. A life of man is incomprehensible if what is there to it, is only existence between birth and death. There is more than just that: it has a higher destiny and fulfillment. Such destiny and fulfillment are realized only in a personality that shared in the life of the Risen Lord. It means a human personality that has been born anew into a spiritual life in Jesus Christ. And therefore, even here and now, that personality has resurrection-life or eternal life. Thus, when we speak of human personality that is immortal, we do not mean anything else but that. It is true that man's life here on earth even though he has already the gift of eternal life, does not reach or complete fulfillment. Man arrives to that stage only when He who is perfect comes, even the Lord Jesus Christ. But the question still remains to be answered: Does man's personality, viz. his whole integral being, continue to live and develop or mature into perfection after his life in the body ends? Or does he fall asleep in death and wait for the final and great Day of the Lord at the Resurrection? The objector cited at the beginning of this section is not really bothered about these questions. But it seems that these are basic questions which must be faced seriously. To us, the symbol of the great and final Day of the Lord in the Resurrection is more meaningful in the context of 'those who have fallen asleep' and are waiting for their resurrection than the idea that the 'spiritual soul' or the 'integral personality' lives on – on a different level of existence and matures into perfection.

Finally we must have something to say as we minister to the dying and the bereaved. While this can be considered one of the delicate ministries of the Church to her members, it seems to be one of those 'neglected' tasks of the Church in general, and of the pastor in particular. This fact is well borne out by the numerous

articles, which appear in journals and periodicals dealing with pastoral questions during the last few years. All of them try to stress in one way or another the importance of ministering to the dying. Also a good number of books on the subject of dying and death – approached historically, sociologically; culturally or theologically – have been published within these past few years. Such interest demands now our attention and practical comments. It is a general consensus among doctors, pastors, hospital chaplains, clinical psychologists and counselors, that death or dying is a fatal crisis in man's life because it does not only threaten the loss of life we cherish, it also threatens the loss of life's values we live by. It likewise, threatens to cut once and for all human personal relationships with loved ones and friends. The result of such crisis and intense feeling of loss is utter loneliness and the unbearable anguish of separation. In this moment of crisis, it is indeed ill – advised to tell – though unfortunately it happens oftentimes – the dying or the bereaved, in case death has already taken place, that there is nothing to worry about, it will be alright in heaven because the 'dear one' has the assurance of salvation. To put it mildly, this is outrageous, and the one who is giving such 'good piece of advice' does not really know what death is, or what it is to be in utter loneliness and anguish. It has been rightly said that no dying person alone can cope with the tragic crisis of death. What is needed therefore is a deep sense of understanding and sympathy on the part of those who are called to minister and comfort the dying or the bereaved ones. Such understanding and sympathy need to manifest in one's presence with them. Often in such moments, silence is more helpful than words. The assurance of a loving company helps the dying to feel – if he is still aware of it – that he is wanted and not just left out to finish off.

The fear and anguish of separation from a hitherto significant relationship with the members of the family and friends cannot be brushed aside by merely exhorting

that we shall meet someday in heaven. That is too simple. The threat of a seemingly absolute separation can be bound by no other than the 'cords of love: Did not St. Paul say, out of a seasoned experience with the Risen Lord, 'who can separate us from the love of Christ?' Nothing! Indeed nothing. But again, that love of Christ shed abroad in our hearts can also become just mere words. What we are asked for is to have a dynamic relationship between us, the dying and the bereaved, nourished in love and concern. This need not start when the person is already dying. It can start much earlier, even as early as when he is healthy. This is where Christian nurture should come alive. A Christian is not only preached to but taught. He should be taught in words, the certainties of life in and through the Risen Lord. This can be done in a Sunday School, or in a Bible study group, or even in a house Church meeting. But a Christian can also be taught the assurance of the Future Hope within the context of a living Christian relationship in brotherly love and concern. Nowadays, this is a far cry in Christian Churches. Christian fellowships have become and are fast becoming impersonal. Love is a very personal force – it cannot grow impersonally. It grows only within a fellowship. And it binds together those who are in fellowship around and with the Living Lord Jesus Christ.

In case relationship like this has not been established in the Christian fellowship, the dying must be made to feel that he is really loved and taken care of with concern. It means real effort on the part of those who have come to share in the suffering and anguish of the family and the dying, to reflect genuine love, which Jesus Christ alone can inspire. The dying and the bereaved should be made to feel that the love of God shown in Jesus Christ would not let them go even in death. The concrete expression of this can be seen and felt in the gathering together of relatives, friends or Church members to stand by the bedside of death or in support

of those left behind, against the invasion of death. Practice like this – which is certainly more than just a formal condolence visit – is much more common in Asian societies than in the West.

In death and dying life is being negated. And the final word for man is despair even if he has all the success and achievement in his lifetime. He stands on the brink of nothingness while fear dominates his last moments of physical existence. What has the Church or the Christian to say about this? Probably, he has not much to say but he can take up the challenge of nothingness by affirming life. And life for him is more than just material existence. It would indeed be a very poor kind of life – in fact one wonders whether it is really life at all – if that is all what we have to it. Yes, life is the gift of God and to affirm God's goodness is to take seriously and appreciate the lasting worth of life, which God has created. It is a life, which God, in His purpose and will, can lead to immortality and resurrection beyond man's mortal limit in death. If we can impress this positive meaning of life on the dying or on those who feel the pangs of the loss of a loved- one, then we have given hope to him who is in despair and in fear.

Lastly, our hope is only in the Lord Jesus Christ, who died, hence experienced the horror of death and dissolution, was buried, but conquered death when he rose from the dead on the third day. To those and for those who share in His death in suffering and death itself, and participate in the victory of His resurrection, are given the glorious hope of the redemption of the body, the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. Wherefore, whether a Christian stands by the bedside of pain and death or attends the funeral of a loved- one, the glow of the Spirit of Christ and the deep-seated assurance derived from daily experience of the Risen Lord come to him afresh and radiate from him to those who otherwise could have never known what it is to live a

life in the midst of death, and in the midst of death, a life in expectant Hope.

Let me end with a Prayer of a British NT Scholar William Barclay, in his book *More Prayers for the Plain Man*, p.42. "Help me to do each task, to face each duty, to shoulder each responsibility as it comes to me, so that, if life should end tonight for me, there will be no loose ends, no things half-finished, no tasks undone: through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen."