

Towards a Theology of Death*

by

Domingo J. Diel, Jr.

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 process 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 deaths until purified from sin and stain of the body by numberless sojourns in the world; and

through 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 earthly life is over. Then, of course, there is the Greek classical theory of the natural immortality of the soul. According to this concept, death is a great liberator, And as long as man lives, his soul is imprisoned by the body which is essentially alien to it. The body is only an outer garment that prevents the soul from moving freely and living in conformity with its proper eternal essence. Death leads the soul from the prison of the body into its eternal home. And fi-

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nally, 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 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 influence and effect upon the whole outlook of man on life in general and on 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 sceptic'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 a precondition for the

true and fuller life of man. The former, views death as the natural end of the process of life and the latter perceives death as the dissolution of bodily life and the 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 that is of utmost seriousness, not only because it ends all human life, existence and enterprise, but also because 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. For how can life really be happy when it is lived under fear and terror of death? An objector proposes that death must be considered and accepted plainly as natural and, therefore, must be welcomed as 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 treats the

reality of death too naively and considers fear and trust in absolutely exclusive terms, let alone as simple alternatives. The verdict of both Swiss theologians, Brunner and Barth on this objection is that it simply fails to face up seriously to 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 a kindly angel of light. John Baillie shares in the verdict when he says that there could be no shallower thing than to face partings and bereavements of which everyday life is full, dissolution and corruption in which every life must end, with more 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.

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 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, education and in almost all fields of human endeavour. But is it 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 enlarging his barn for his plentiful harvest, he can really settle down and be at ease: eating, drinking and getting merry, because he has many years 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. 12:20). As a matter of fact, that rich man had never had a chance to finish his plan, much less enjoy anything that he had. Death had 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 a particular kind of 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 impor-

tant 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 splendour 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.' Both of these charges have the same basis of interest: the world or the earth.

We combine these two charges into one and answer it in two ways. Firstly, the conclusion of the charge 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 enamoured 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 concerned 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 failure. 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 neighbour'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 a 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 who was not 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 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 perfection or complete fulfilment. 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 counsellors 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 and that it will be all right 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, nor 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 be 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 found 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 is asked for is to have a dynamic relationship between us and the dying or 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 the 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 relationships like this have 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, in reflecting the 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 life time. 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 moral 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.

Finally, 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 they 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.