

THE DEATH OF A HUMAN BEING

(cf. Homily—Mass for Life—Friday, May 3, 2013)

Any issue concerning life is a delicate one, as it covers the scope of human tragedies, suffering, and pain. An important truth about this pain and suffering is that they belong to, and are felt by, a human being. I would like us to take some time now to examine, and reflect on, the issue of the end of life: when death presents itself on the horizon and is accompanied by illness, suffering, and pain.

How do we accompany someone in such a situation? How do we accompany a person who will soon face the end of his or her life?

I would like to call your attention to Jesus Christ upon his crucifixion, to the needs of the dying, to the accompaniment of the living, and to the call to make of our own death, a gift.

Contemplating Jesus and his Crucifixion

In the Gospel of John, when referring to his own life, Jesus Christ declared, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." Externally, this is not what took place. His life, in fact, was taken. He was beaten, flogged, crowned with thorns, and was crucified. Many desired that death come upon him and someone pierced his heart to ensure his end.

Yet, astonishingly, Jesus said, "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." His desire to make of his life a gift was so strong that he made it so, one that he bestowed on his Father for us. Even his suffering was a gift, also bestowed on his Father for us.

If, when in Gethsemane, someone had approached him and said, "Listen, you have lived well until now, you have sent a beautiful message, and now all that lies ahead for you is suffering and death. If you want, we will help you. We will inject you with a poison that will kill you instantaneously and painlessly. You will not have to undergo the Passion, agony, and death on the cross." Would they have been providing a service, assistance, or care to Jesus? What a loss that would have been for humanity!

When we speak of someone's life, we generally refer to the part of their life that came before their death—He lived, he did this, he said that, and then he died—as though death was not a part of life, and as though suffering was not a part of life. It is as though life remains on one side, and suffering and death remain on the other, and are something altogether different.

What is clear with Jesus Christ is that to speak of suffering and death is to still be speaking of life, for the most important moment in his life was his death on the

cross. That was when he did the most for us; his death on the cross, his suffering... Everything from his agony in Gethsemane to the moment he died on the cross is all more important than anything he had ever said up until then, than any of the miracles he had performed. This is because he gave of himself entirely to the end, and because he loved with a boundless love.

In this respect, we as Christians have no choice but to refer to Jesus Christ's crucifixion as our starting point. By rising again after he was crucified, Jesus showed us that death is not the end of life, or of love, and he showed us a path towards hope. In the Gospel of John, we find a passage (Jn 13:1) that refers to the hour that had come for him *"to depart from this world and go to the Father"* rather than referring to 'the hour of Jesus' death.'

This is a light that is shed from the life and the love that only Jesus Christ can give us. Undeniably, in the first instance we welcomed this light, we did so through the light of faith. It is one that every human heart needs. We therefore are not meant to keep it only for ourselves, those who are faithful in Jesus Christ. In humankind's search for a way to persevere through anxiety and death, we are called to be witnesses to the light of life. It is a light that we are not only meant to receive, but also to share with others. There is a light that comes from the cross and that has the power to touch every heart, whoever it may be. For Jesus Christ gave his life for everyone.

Therefore, contemplate Jesus and his crucifixion. We cannot touch on the issues of life and death, and of threats against life, without first turning to Jesus and his crucifixion, and without acknowledging that we need him and his cross.

We Need the Dying.

The second point I invite you to reflect on is our need for the dying. At first glance at our society, we may think that what we need are producers and consumers, useful people that keep the economy rolling or that enter a material life cycle. Of course, these do play a role in life, but does it encompass what life is about?

At times we treat suffering and death a little as though they were on the sidelines. We clearly see that we may have something to offer to the dying, to those who are suffering, but we do not always see that they too have something to give, something that we need. When we are confronted with a tragic health issue within our own families and find ourselves dealing with a loved one who may soon face death, great courage and generosity are required of us. No matter how people deal with it, this kind of situation is always a difficult one.

We often hear people say what an enriching experience it was to have devoted themselves to a family member during their dying days. From the beginning of, and throughout the entire experience, there are moments of reconciliation and hope. There comes a point when we have to face the challenge of turning our life

upside down to make time, time that we want to give but that is not always easy to find. We often discover that a single second can bring us closer to eternity and evoke a sense of eternity.

I recall a woman who shared with me the time she was at her dying mother's bedside. She watched as her mother—who hadn't spoken for days—looked into her eyes with such love... The moment lasted only a fraction of a second, but it left her with an immense feeling of hope.

Above and beyond the difficult moments, our experience can be transformed into a beautiful one once we realize that the person we are accompanying not only needs us, but also contributes to our life in some way. When we open ourselves to this, when we allow ourselves to experience the event and to welcome the hardship, we give ourselves the opportunity to discover the goodness that emanates from it. We need the dying.

Making the Dying the Focus of Society

As a society, we need to bring our focus back to the dying. We need to place them at the heart of both our society and our families. In a sense, there are other important elements in life, yet we understand that humankind thirsts for life, and was created for it. Facing death can become a key moment tied to the meaning of life itself. In as much that the moment of death can devastate us, it can also become an opening for hope.

Placing the dying person at the centre of society, at the centre of the family, gives us the means to learn more about ourselves. We are living beings, but we are made for more than just the life in this world. We are filled with a thirst for the absolute. We are made for eternity, and when we accompany the dying, we witness a passing into eternity and we catch a glimpse of it. The light does not always shine as brightly at that precise moment, sometimes it appears later on, but there are moments of light, and it becomes present.

Therefore, contemplating Jesus Christ and his crucifixion, and discovering that we need the dying allow us to realize the most profound meaning of our existence. If life was made solely for our benefit, and was considered valid only when we had our health, or when all was well, or when our material needs were met, then life would be pointless most of the time.

If we are looking to give life meaning, we want this meaning to withstand suffering and death. Have you experienced failure? Life still has meaning. Were you struck with rejection? Life still has meaning. Have you been weakened by illness? Life still has meaning. You know that you are dying? Life still has meaning. The point is to discover a meaning for life that can withstand everything that life consists of, and that will benefit you not only in times of joy, but also in times of hardship.

Accompanying the Living.

Before we learn that a person is dying, we considered them to be among the living. It is important to see that a dying person is still a living one, even with death so close. In this respect, to accompany the dying is above all to welcome and accompany the living, the living who are reaching the end of their life, and to accompany them up to the end, with physical, spiritual, and family care.

It is in doing so that we come to the realization that ***this dying person is a living human being***. It becomes an act of trust in this human life and one of hope in God who is present and at work.

Taking this into consideration, if we say, as some may think, that if we truly want to help someone that is suffering, we have to eliminate them, by euthanasia or by assisted suicide, end-of-life care or aid in dying... Regardless of what we may call it, ***as soon as we directly cause someone's death, take measures intended to kill someone, we are no longer accompanying them, but eliminating them***. We are not providing care, we are eliminating the patient that requires care.

In this respect, accompanying a person is a commitment to the end. You are familiar with the importance of terminology. *Overtreatment*, for example, refers to when we want to help someone so much and do so by means that are disproportionate to the results that we hope to gain. In a way, to provide accompaniment we must come to terms with our mortality, and at the same time, make the commitment to carry out the accompaniment to the end.

In the same way, it is justifiable to stop excessive treatment that will no longer result in helping someone. Therefore, to stop treatment is, in this case, to accept that we are mortal. We are not causing the death, the illness is. However, the moment we start considering options that will hasten a person's death—because that person is suffering—is the moment we are ceasing to accompany them and are beginning the process of eliminating them.

Making a Gift of Our Death

So these are sensitive issues for which we do not have easy answers. It is certain though, that with eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, we receive the ability to discern, to see the human being in every person who is sick, and the gift that every human being is, regardless of their frailty, of what point they have reached in life, or of what state their health is in. We see the value of every human being, the sanctity of life, from the moment we are conceived to when we die a natural death.

Therefore, I invite you to pray, because there is a light that comes from God. God is life and the creator of life. He created us. And God, in this respect, is the primary protector of life. But how does he protect it? How does he protect our life? He does

so by giving his life for us in Jesus Christ. He shows us that life is meant to be given.

We are meant to learn to give of ourselves. If we make of our life a journey of giving, with all our weaknesses, our sins, and our obstacles, we are preparing to make of our death a gift as well. We prepare for our death by making of our life a journey of giving. We prepare for death as a passage to eternal life by making of our life a journey of giving, of prayer, and of giving to others, a journey of opening ourselves up to God.

When, in this state of grace, we meet others who are also experiencing and are open to this grace—as this grace is offered to everyone—it leads them to live their life as a gift, in prayer. It leads them to faithfully give of themselves to others, to their families, at the moment of their suffering and death. Even as we turn to help and comfort them, we discover that we in turn are comforted. I am certain that you have experienced this before. How many times have we wanted to comfort someone just to find that we were comforted by them in the end?

When someone makes a gift of their frailty and suffering, the light flows from their frailty and from their gaze. The work of Jesus Christ is powerful. It is a labour of love and of kindness, of which we are all in need. We can pray that everyone in society, during these times we now live in, for both believers as well as those who are furthest from Christ, may discover and rediscover Jesus Christ's kindness and God's power over life, and his power over death. God has the eternal power to transform our death into a gift that we give to others through love, and into a passage to eternal life.

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