



Personal Thoughts About Last Things

November is the month of the dead — dead leaves, dead saints, the dear, dead friends and neighbors we like to call the "faithful departed." We can never be absolutely sure of how faithful they were — everybody has his secret or not-so-secret sins, sometimes called "skeletons in the closet." But we do know they are departed. And we know, when we think about it, that in due time so shall we be. Which is why we try to avoid thinking about it as much as possible.



It was at the end of All Saints Day on November 1, which is the eve of All Souls Day, that I happened to meet a gentleman of my acquaintance whom even I may regard as advanced in years. I asked in the usual way, how he was doing.

"Well, I'm still living," he said, cheerfully.

"Yeah, but that can't last," I reminded him.

"Well," he laughed, "I made it to 80." Everyday after that is an added gift, he said.

They are all added gifts, since none of us knows when his time will come. But we do know the time is coming, however adept we are at pushing the thought out of our minds and keeping it out with all sorts of diversions. I recall hearing a priest one Sunday morning quoting to those of us assembled before him, a solemn sentence from the Rule of Saint Benedict: "Remind yourself everyday that you are going to die."

A sobering thought, you might say. But is it? One might be tempted to consider it superfluous. Why would we need to remind ourselves of something so obvious? But the human mind has an uncanny knack for overlooking the obvious. One might even say the beasts of the forest, the pigeons of a rooftop, or the squirrels in our backyard have a greater awareness of the nearness of death than we humans do. For they are constantly taking flight and seeking refuge from every real or apparent danger, while we have forgotten what danger is. Our heads are filled with worrisome headlines about an inadequate supply of vaccine to shield us from the H1N1 virus, which has, at last count, killed roughly 1,000 people in the United States. Yet we think nothing of hopping into our automobiles and venturing out onto the highways where 40 times that many are killed in crashes every year. And most of us do not let danger deter us from climbing aboard an elongated tin can with wings and flying therein across the country or across an ocean. We are fearless. And we feel immortal.

Yet death is ever near and its reminders keep sneaking up on us against our will. We may loathe and fear the Grim Reaper, but he is a member of all our families, being related in some way to Father Time. I hate Father Time. And I don't appreciate hearing about him even from those well-meaning souls who mention him as they pass me, going faster than I. I recall one time going jogging from the YMCA when



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another runner, who left after I did, came up from behind and asked how I was doing as he was passing me. I don't know what I answered but it couldn't have been too cheerful.

"Well," he said in what was meant to be a word of consolation. "Father Time has a way of catching up to all of us."

"Really?" I said in mock surprise. "I hadn't noticed," I said to his back. I grumbled to myself as he disappeared down the road, "Father Time's been running over me for years."

And I have seen where he is leading me. We have, most of us, had occasion to visit the sick and the dying in hospitals and nursing homes. We have observed not only those we have come to see, but dozens of others, many of them appearing to be wanting not only in strength, but in hope. And there are others who appear so blessedly at peace, calmly and confidently awaiting their time of departure.

"The prospect of being hanged in a fortnight concentrates the mind wonderfully," Dr. Samuel Johnson said in a day when the wheels of justice turned more swiftly than they do today. The prospect of death at any time ought to concentrate our minds at least occasionally on what the theologians of the early church called the Four Last Things: Death and Judgment, Heaven and Hell.

Not long ago I had the opportunity to visit on his deathbed a beloved monk whom I had known for some years. After some initial pleasantries, I found myself at a loss for what to say. Foolishly, I filled a lull in the conversation by asking: "Have you been keeping up with the news of the world?" It struck me at once how silly it was to ask that of a monk more than 90 years old as he lay waiting to meet to meet his God and Savior. Yet his answer was one of a marvelous, eloquent simplicity.

"Why bother?" he said. Indeed, he might have said the same thing, twenty, thirty or sixty years earlier while in the bloom of good health. We live in the world and the news of the world is not unimportant. But it is not as important as we often make it out to be. Nor, surely, are the ball games or the movies, soap operas and other diversions with which we fill our minds to the point of crowding out thoughts of death and of life in another world.

"But as it is written, Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things that God has prepared for those who love him." (I Corinthians 2:9) Well, now that seems a good deal more encouraging than talk of Father Time. There are, of course, other words in Sacred Scripture that are not so reassuring.

"But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give an account thereof on the Day of Judgment." (Matthew 12:36) Oh-oh! It's going to be a long day.

I sometimes regard that verse as the most troubling in all the Bible. For I know my own frequently intemperate tongue and I recall the story of another man who lay dying, a man who was, to all appearances, not nearly as holy as my dear friend, the monk. He was, I'm afraid, much more like yours truly. As the story goes, a well-meaning young man sat at his bedside and tried to whisper words of consolation.

"The angels are waiting, sir," he said gently. Suddenly the old man regained some of his former strength and started to sit up. "Waiting are they?" he roared. "Waiting are they? Well ... [expletive deleted], let 'em wait!"

Perhaps God, in his tremendous mercy, overlooked that intemperate word. For my sake, and all our sakes, I hope so.



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