For Personal Reflection

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1. How well do I live each day?
2. Do I consider my own mortality on occasion?
3. How do I feel when I think about death? Death in general? Death of loved ones? My own?
4. How does the Salesian notion of considering death strike you?
5. What about the notion of my own death do I find most unsettling or confrontational?
6. Do I worry about death too much? Do I consider the reality of death too infrequently?
7. In what ways can considering my own eventual death be healthy and appropriate? In what ways can it become debilitating?

Further Reading

Second Book of Maccabees

First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians

Pulpit and Pew: A Study in Salesian Preaching. Vincent Kerns, MSFS. 1976, S. F. S. Printing School.

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Live This Day...

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

As if it were your last

"It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead." (2 Maccabees, Chapter 12)

It is also holy and wholesome to think about death in general. And our own death in particular. Consider the words of St. Paul: "My friends, I face death every day." (1 Corinthians 15)

Spend our lives thinking about death? No, not quite. But casting an occasional glance during life to our eventual demise in death can be quite beneficial without being a 'bummer'.

"That is the essence of Christian perfection: to ask for nothing from God, to refuse nothing from God. Don't ask for death, but don't refuse it when it comes."

"A Christian should never be afraid of death in the sense of being unprepared for it. But even when a person is prepared, that person is still not free from fear. No one is ever sure of being quite ready for that last journey: a person must live a good life to die a good death." (Pulpit and Pew, p. 289)

To think about death—to consider that our days on this earth are limited—is a holy, wholesome and prudent thing to do. However, it must not be done in ways that depress or debilitate. "We should fear death without dreading it. We must not be so afraid of death that we lose our peace of soul. We fight our way through life under the standard of God's loving care, ready to accept all God sends, trusting God to take care of us. So don't give in to unnerving fears, like the good woman who spent a whole morning thinking of death, and then upset her entire household for the rest of the day, so much so that no one had any peace." (*Ibid*, p. 290)

"The reality of death reminds us of the passing nature of the precious gift of life."

Francis de Sales offers a simple practice for reminding ourselves not only of our mortality, but also of God's immortal care and love for us. "You might find it helpful, each time you go to sleep, to see your bed as a symbol of the grave and sleep as a dress rehearsal for death. One day we shall die and be laid in the grave and be covered with earth and return to dust. We, who go to bed tonight, do not know whether we will be alive tomorrow. Such thoughts are good, because they help us to always be ready for death, spending each day as we would if we knew it were our last." (*Ibid*, p. 291))

This awareness calls for a delicate balance: we should fear death without dreading it. Our anticipation — or apprehension — of death must be calm and trustful. "All we have to do is to leave ourselves to God's care, asking nothing and refusing nothing. That is the essence of Christian perfection: to ask for nothing from God, to refuse nothing from God. Don't ask for death, but don't refuse it when it comes. Happy those who practice this indifference, who prepare for a happy death—whenever God decrees it—by living a good life!" (*Ibid*)

Francis tells a story about a Spanish king who conducted an investigation into the behavior of his police officers. At the end of the day, only one officer was found to be above reproach: his professional behavior was without blemish. When asked by his superiors how he had managed to remain so loyal as to have a blameless record, he replied that "aware that commissioners would one day come to make a rigorous check, he tried his best to live in such a way as he would like them to find him. This was the secret of his success: the fear of being found wanting caused him to live each day as if he would have to make a full report that day on his conduct." (*Ibid*, pp. 291-292)

"This awareness calls for a delicate balance: we should fear death without dreading it."

The reality of death reminds us of the passing nature of the precious gift of live. A prudent apprehension of death must not paralyze us but rather motivate us to make the very best use of each day, each hour and each moment that God sees fit to give us.

Take heart from the words of Rudyard Kipling: "Live each day as if it were your last. One day, you're sure to be right."