For Personal Reflection

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1. On any given day, do you think about death?
2. How do you feel when you think about death or mortality?
3. What is your worst fear about death?
4. Consider Francis de Sales' advice: how does his observations and advice make you feel? Are you less, or more, anxious?
5. What, in your experience, is the best way to prepare for death?
6. What, in your experience, is the best way to deal with the dread that sometimes comes with thinking about your death or the death of a loved one?

Further Reading

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

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Afraid...

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

Of Death?

On some level or another, who wouldn't be?

In sermon preached in 1622 during the season of Lent, Francis de Sales said: "A Christian should never be afraid of death in the sense of being unprepared for it. But even when one is prepared, one is still not free from fear. No one is ever sure of being quite ready for that last journey: a person needs to be good at life in order to die a good death, and no one can be absolutely certain that one is good, that he or she is in the state of grace required at the moment of death. Only a special revelation could assure such a person of that; and even those who have had this assurance were still not free from fear. Our Lord himself, in his human nature, was afraid to die. Still, all the Fathers of the Church tell us that we must fear death without being afraid of it."

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

Easier said than done!

In a sermon preached at the Visitation Again, as we have seen countless times before, the reason that we rely upon Francis de Sales for encouragement and strength is because his advice is so deeply rooted in reality. "The man who is not afraid of death is in a very bad way, and in grave danger. Our place after death is eternal: we shall be either saved or lost for ever. So even God's greatest servants have feared this last stage of the journey upon which so much depends…"

The secret, Francis de Sales would tell us, is to fear death *without dreading it*.

"Our Lord himself, in his human nature, was afraid to die. Still, all the Fathers of the Church tell us that we must fear death without being afraid of it."

"We must not be so afraid of death that we lose our peace of soul. Christians fights their way through life under the standard of God's loving providence, ready to accept all God sends, trusting God will take care of them. So, don't give way to uneasy fears, lest you end up like the good woman who spent an entire morning thinking about death to the point of upsetting her entire household for the remainder of the day, with the result that no one had any peace."

It seems that she had obsessed so much about dying that she ended up deprived of the energy required for living. And to add insult to injury, she drove everybody else around her crazy.

So, Francis would counsel us, our "apprehension must be calm and trustful; we are to fear death without dreading it."

At the opening of an episode of the HBO series *Band of Brothers*, American veterans of the invasion of France (and subsequent battles in France and Germany) were asked if they were afraid of dying during the war. To a man, they essentially gave the same answer: 'you'd be crazy not to be afraid, but you had to learn to get through it and to keep moving if you had any chance of staying alive…'

Francis said it this way: "All we have to do is leave ourselves to God's providence, asking nothing and refusing nothing. That is the essence of Christian perfection: to ask nothing from God, to refuse nothing from him. Don't ask God for death, but don't refuse it when it comes. Happy those who can practice this indifference, who prepare for a happy death—whenever God decrees it—by a good life! This is what all the saints have done. Some set aside a certain time each year to think about death: some even did it once a month, others once a week, or every day, at a fixed time. By frequently remembering the inevitability of death, they tried to ensure a successful journey from this world to the next…"

"We must not be so afraid of death that we lose our peace of soul. Christians fight their way through life under the standard of God's loving providence, ready to accept all God sends, trusting God will take care of them. So, don't give way to uneasy fears…"

The truth is that we die a little bit every day: each day brings with it its own share of uncertainty, of risk, of loss. To the extent that we can deal with the daily dying that is part and parcel of daily living, we can name and face our fear of death...without allowing that fear to kill us! Francis de Says said: "How happy we should be, if only we would live each of our days with the thought of the account that we must give of them...this is the secret of a good life, and a sure way of guaranteeing that we shall have a clean record on the last day."