

# DEATH—THE FINAL PROBATION

By ANDREW HAMILTON

**T**O CALL DEATH THE FINAL PROBATION may appear a black joke. And even more reprehensibly, given the place that final probation has within religious formation, to display cynicism about processes of formation.

That is as may be. But the title of this article also allows me to reflect on religious life and formation in the light of apparently disparate and everyday experiences which have affected my own approach to them.

The first was an exchange which took place many years ago, after I had spoken to a group of parents about changes in religious education, I emphasized—rightly, as I still believe—the importance of addressing ourselves to the experience of the children when speaking to them of faith, and of celebrating in ways adapted to their stage of development. This demanded that we take with them an approach to the faith different from that which we would use with adults.

After the talk one of the parents argued in response that the proper task of religious education was to prepare people for death, so that the last things should stand at the centre of children's education in the faith. I disagreed with the conclusions he drew for the curriculum, but the challenge seemed of a far more serious order than those usually made on such occasions. It was based on a hard-edged understanding of religious formation.

Some years later, I took part in a conversation in which seminarians of another congregation discussed the impending ordination of one of their colleagues. They were disturbed because they believed that the young man's request for ordination had been scrutinized only perfunctorily by his superiors. They believed that his intense devotional life expressed fear rather than piety, and that he was unequipped for ministry in the contemporary world. I agreed with their judgement. He was ordained, nonetheless, and returned to work in his own country. Shortly afterwards, he was taken and shot by bandits. For such ministry, his formation had been adequate. The story led me to ask whether we could ever speak of religious formation adequately except through telling black jokes.

Thirdly, at the end of 1989 I took a part in a meeting in Bangkok of people who were working with refugees. The third day of the meeting was demanding. People spoke of the ways in which refugees were almost everywhere being killed and mistreated, and of the harm that could come to refugees and workers alike should the latter protest against even the most blatant violation of human rights. That night we learned of the murder of Elba and Celina Ramos and six Jesuits in El Salvador. On the following day a seventh from their community, then lecturing in Thailand, joined our meeting. That day it was clear that an adequate formation for vast numbers of human beings in our world would prepare them for death and diminishment, and that formation for those who would accompany the victims of our world must also reckon with the likelihood of untimely death.

In each of these experiences religious formation was associated with death. Each suggested that patterns of formation which did not take death into account would be trivial, and that the unpredictability and inevitability of death tested the rhetoric and theory of religious formation. So, together they invited deeper reflection on the complex relationships between religious formation and death.

To link death and final probation, however, is also to say something about the period of sustained reflection which religious of many congregations undertake ten years or so after entry. By this time their initial idealism has usually been tested by self-discovery and by a relatively unillusioned recognition of the reality of the congregation which they have joined and of the world in which they live. Their reflection allows them to deepen an adult faith. Adult faith, too, is distinguished by its readiness to accept the fact of death.

#### *Adult faith for adults*

It is easier to tell stories about adult faith than to define it. An adult faith, for example, finds God's activity and purposes in a world in which four people may contract terminal cancer. Two find long remission, one attributing it to prayer to Our Lady of Garabandal, the other to a diet of sunflower seeds. Of the two who die, one lived a generous and prayerful life, while the other was a scoundrel. An adult faith, then, must accept that the ways of God and the immediate destiny of human beings are of such a sort that they can neither be predicted nor manipulated by prayer, faith, virtue or assurance.

An adult faith, too, reckons with the reality of the Church and of the world. It recognizes that church sponsorship of an enterprise offers as little guarantee as does any other sponsorship that your

money will be safe from fraud or incompetence. Nor does it identify God's promise to be with the Church to the end of time with a guaranteed future for patterns of worship and of life with which we are comfortable or for the congregations in which we live. Nor does it associate the holiness of the Church with the quality of life of those who lead or who are led. It accepts that wisdom, honesty and integrity are rare human gifts, that they are neither confined to nor guaranteed within the Church, and that they may flicker dimly within our own lives and within the groups among whom we live. It recognizes that it is possible to have died as a human being while being religiously observant and without having committed what moralists would call mortal sin; that it is also possible to be humanly alive within a life which is outwardly chaotic. The search for life, wisdom and integrity, then, will necessarily cross boundaries of church and belief.

In short, to be an adult is to have recognized all this, not theoretically, but within our bones. It is to know at last that we are mortal, that our purposes and our projects are precarious, that we are not owed a living, and that our lives and the congregations which support us could die at any time. There is no special providence, no pattern of virtuous, clever or prayerful living that will ensure that we shall stay alive while others die, that we shall avoid the illness or the accidents which others suffer, no easy path of life which will bring us happiness. Nor are there any paths of public fidelity which will make our congregations and church prosper, no guarantee in our prosperity that we are living faithfully, nor any necessary proof of infidelity in our lack of prosperity.

To be an adult, then, is to have discovered in our own lives both our mortality and what we call the problem of evil (which is really not a problem to be solved but a fact of life to be recognized), and that these facts cannot be changed by wishing or praying them to be otherwise.

### *The two paths*

In the face of this world, adults (and indeed children) have only two choices. We may accept that in life in all its shapes, including centrally the death that marks its ending and changing, God's love and care are to be found. Or we may fear death, denying its reality, and shaping the world in ways that entrench and give apparent solidity to our denial. These are respectively the way of life and the way of death. Because they represent the deepest paths of human

choice, both can be given a religious justification and a religious rhetoric. After sketching the broad outlines of these two paths, I would like then to reflect on the rhetoric which surrounds religious life.

The Christian path of meeting death both in its larger and smaller forms is clearly and uncompromisingly sketched in the gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount, the deceptively simple path of trust is to live without concern for tomorrow, like the flowers of the field or the birds of the air. But although we are not to be concerned about tomorrow, the Sermon on the Mount clearly takes it into account. For tomorrow, the flowers which today bloom in all their glory will be dead and thrown into the oven. We know, however, that the God who watches over both blooming and burning is a God of love. To imitate the flowers of the field is not to ignore the future, but to know that we shall die, and so to bloom exuberantly precisely because we have weighed and accepted our death. The imagery of the Sermon adumbrates the path of Christ, who is said to foretell his death and to live freely, trusting God, in the face of it. Ultimately his path to death becomes a path and source of life for his followers.

The alternative is to live in fear of death. The fear of death disguises itself, for it drives us to mask the world in ever more elaborate ways in order to conceal the reality of death. The best human qualities and human enterprises can be used to exclude from sight death and its shadows. So the cult of youth hides the world of dying, age and sickness, the shadows of death. To keep good health becomes a moral burden, and sickness, unshapeliness or lack of physical tone a cause for guilt. The cult of success, and the corresponding fear of failure, another image of death, can lead us to seek a safe, predictable and conventionally successful life where we avoid new challenges and demanding changes. For there we are naked to the threat of failure. We can also cling to even the best of work, not for the joy or life it brings to us nor for any benefit which it brings to others, but because it keeps death back over the horizon.

The fear of death, too, can take the form of the pursuit of relationships and diversion which protect us from ever facing the loneliness and boredom in which we anticipate our death. In his incomparable evocation of friendship in the *Confessions*, Augustine calls this the great lie of immortality:

The grief I felt after the loss of my friend had struck so easily into my inmost heart simply because I had poured out my soul upon him like water upon sand, loving a man who was mortal as though he were

never to die. My greatest comfort and relief was in the solace of other friends who shared my love of the huge fable which I loved instead of you, my God, the long drawn lie which our minds were always itching to hear. [Penguin translation]

These are only a few examples of the many ways in which each of us builds our own walls to keep death out of sight.

*Developing a rhetoric*

Each of these paths of life develops words to describe and commend it. The path of trust indeed needs persuasive words to attract people to what is by any standards a risky undertaking. The path of denial, too, is well served when it has religious camouflage. Indeed, the same words can be used to justify quite different enterprises. In the film, *Jesus of Montreal*, for example, the most poignant and telling criticism of the Church comes after Fr Leclerc has given an impassioned and moving defence of the shelter which his shrine gives to the broken of the world, and an ultimately pathetic defence of his refusal to leave his ministry. Daniel replies, in an equally simple and impassioned way, that surely there is more to life than waiting for death. Despite the words, the ministry of priest and of shrine are built on the fear and denial of death, not on the trust that leads to bold living in its face. The words do no more than make the lie plausible.

In the Church, the path of trust has found its richest symbols in martyrdom and in religious life. The path of trust has always appealed to the stories of martyrs. From the death of Stephen, through the passions of Polycarp and Perpetua in the early Church, and the stories of the Reformation martyrs on both sides, down to martyrs of our day, like Archbishop Romero in El Salvador, the stories of the martyrs have always been repeated to encourage a life lived generously and unfretfully in the face of death.

The rhetoric of martyrdom, however, can be used also to mask the reality of death. The simple acts of the early martyrs, such as Justin and the martyrs of Scilli, soon gave way to more romantic accounts, and their message became correspondingly muddled. From insisting first that our lives should not be controlled by the fear of death, they came later to deny that the martyrs even feared death. The brave man of moderation, Athanasius, counted it as evidence for Christian faith that people, including weak women, rushed to death without fear. He was inclined to believe also that Christ knew no fear. Such romantic accounts of martyrs' deaths were helpful at a time when people were familiar with the butchery of public executions, and

knew what they themselves could expect if taken. They encouraged people to find a deeper meaning in their dismembering. But when martyrdom and persecution were things of the past, the romantic stories of martyrdom ceased effectively to commend trust in God in the face of death, and became a denial of the reality and finality of death. Far from encouraging people to face the fear of death, the stories intensified it by denying its real everyday shape. The mood is perfectly expressed in the sentimental, and therefore dishonest, words of Faber's hymn:

How sweet would be their children's fate,  
If they, like them, could die for thee.

*Religious life and its rhetoric*

The stories, however, which are told most pervasively in the Catholic tradition to commend the path of trust have to do with religious life. For religious life is above all a way of living out radical trust in God in such a way that the fear of death in all its forms does not master us. Such is the ideal. If the ideal is accepted, the language of religious life can encompass death and failure in all its dimensions, even the failure to live up to this ideal. The best language about religious life is in fact modest and direct when describing death and its shadows. Ignatius's throw-away parenthesis when describing how Jesuits should live is typical. His sentence begins, 'since sickness is no less a gift from God than health', a phrase both everyday and startling.

The vows specify aspects of this path of life in the face of death. They challenge in detail the fear and denial of death. The vow of poverty enacts a naked trust in God. It challenges the ways in which the fear of death leads us to seek security by gathering possessions, and by defending them against others. This denial of death leads individuals and nations to construct a world order based on greed and on the passion for security, and to regard that world as real. In this reality, it is expedient that many should starve and die in order that we should retain our access to cheap oil. In such a world, to live in a way that proclaims greed and the passion for security to be childish concerns both for persons and for societies, is a profoundly subversive activity.

Thus where the teeth of religious poverty are not pulled in its living, religious and the victims of poverty are clearly and naturally associated. The poor face a death imposed on them because other people make idols of wealth. They idolize wealth, in turn, because

they fear death. Religious, whose own commitment to life has led them to recognize the demonic power of the desire for wealth and security, are naturally drawn to associate with the victims of this desire. They seek them as partners, as the potentially sighted seek each other out in the world of the blind.

The vow of chastity is even more clearly about living in the face of death. Indeed, for most of our contemporaries celibacy is a slow suicide. The connections between sexuality, family and death are subterranean and complex. At their simplest, sexual expression and the bearing of children are a way of transcending ourselves in the face of death. This is clear in hard places. In refugee camps, for example, over one quarter of the population at any time will be under five years old. The statistics communicate instantly both the ways in which refugees' lives have been threatened in the past, and the living death of refugee existence. In such circumstances, to bear children is a protest against death. It can also be a way of denying it. The relationship between death and sexuality is also pursued in more subtle ways in literature, where they act as natural metaphors of one another.

The values placed on sexual expression and on family always tend to be exaggerated, in that they are seen as a form of immortality. It is this claim for both family and sexuality which Christian faith had to deal with in the early centuries of the Church. The notorious suspicion of marriage by Christian writers often had more to do with the way in which their culture saw it as an adequate form of self-transcendence than with suspicion of sexual passion as such. The attitude with which they grappled returns in another key in later times.

In *Dover beach*, for example, Matthew Arnold's final stanza marks a desperate trust in a close relationship to compensate for the loss of meaning and hope.

Ah, love, let us be true  
 To one another! for the world, which seems  
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
 So various, so beautiful, so new,  
 Hath really neither joy nor love, nor light,  
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
 And here we are as on a darkling plain  
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

More vulgar forms of this hope that deep personal relationships will keep death obscured are common in popular western culture, and the

difficulties of forming lasting commitments show that they have failed.

But within any society that nurtures this hope, the vow of chastity is puzzling and offensive because it asserts the reality of death, and claims that human beings can live without denying it, and without constructing a world in which it is neutralized. It asserts that the loneliness of human life can be recognized and supported within a life given to other people, and that mortality is consistent with being both loving and lovable.

Finally, the link between obedience and a life that accepts death is perhaps less evident now than in an earlier period. The early monastic tradition spoke of it as following Christ's path to death and as martyrdom. They told stories in which obedience led people to face death, as they were instructed to cuddle lions or to jump into lighted ovens. While these emphases have fallen out of favour, they pointed to the challenge which obedience makes to our natural tendency to keep death at bay by the use of power. If we are independent and powerful, we can construct our life to avoid threats to our security. We can even remove all those who challenge our security. So, a life which does not include death can be made to form a credible plot. Through obedience, however, we yield our power to construct a death-evading life, and in doing so can also make a powerful political statement. That is the deeper significance of the association between obedience and Christ's passion: Christ laid aside power finally in choosing to die rather than to save himself. As the hymn to the Philippians puts it, 'he became obedient unto death'.

So religious life and the vows have centrally to do with living freely in the face of death and failure. To that extent they represent an heroic option. If it is understood in this way, religious life is for adults. Without maturity, to which religious arrive only after as much struggle as any other human being, the practices and justifications of religious life can deny death instead of being open to it. It can degenerate into search for security, flight from loneliness and pain in relationships, and the building of an unruffled life without responsibility. The reality of religious life can then be simply a waiting for death, and not about living in the face of death. Because this inauthentic life can be defended by traditional language, it will always need to be challenged by language which in turn will have its own inadequacies. So it may be helpful to conclude by looking at some of the ways of speaking about religious life.



*The language of religious life*

If the test of religious life is the realism and freedom with which it leads us to confront our death, many descriptions of it fail to do it justice. First, some ways of speaking current in recent centuries have emphasized fear. They described religious life as the narrow way of saving one's soul, by diverting it from the highway that led to hell to the narrow way of salvation; they considered death above all as a time of harsh judgement; they studied the vows as though they provided both occasions of sin and the means of avoiding them; they encouraged the contemplation of death as an effective way of avoiding sin.

In this way of speaking, death is certainly faced; it is not denied, at least at first. To that extent the attitude which it encourages challenges our culture. But in this construction, the heart of religious life does not lie in the freedom which comes from facing death, but in the fear of death. The path is then not one of trust, but one of suspicion, which eventually leads us to deny death by focusing on the scrupulous observance which will safeguard our salvation. We move from a fearful life through death to a happy eternity, and not along the path of trust: from a free life in the face of death into the complete freedom of eternal life.

Secondly, religious life can adopt idealized forms of discourse which deny death by evading its earthiness. Abstract and official documents often have this tone. The transactions of religious life take place in an ethereal realm with little connection with this world. So, religious life is dissolved into the espousal of Christ or citizenship in the eschatological kingdom, death into participation in the paschal mystery, and so on. The problem with this kind of language does not lie in the concepts which are susceptible of illuminating interpretation. But the language effectively denies both the everyday reality of death and the freedom found in recognizing it. It creates a make-believe world where, unlike the world of everyday life and the gospels, bodies do not smell.

Another idealized form of discourse is the heavily optimistic, where religious life is described as joyful and positive, without reference to death. Poverty is an adventure, chastity is human wholeness to be achieved, and obedience the co-operative disposition. In this approach, a free life is bought too cheaply. The glory of God is a human being fully alive, fixed in a life with Christ on Tabor with no need to come down from the mountain and face the little business that awaits in Jerusalem. While this optimism has freed some people from the fear of death, it is ultimately not credible because it ignores it.

A third form of discourse about religious life emphasizes its functional and technological aspects. Religious life is about human wholeness, which in turn is broken down into its component skills and qualities. Programmes can then be established to develop these skills and qualities. So, the favoured forms of discourse will be psychological, when speaking of chastity, and managerial when speaking of obedience and poverty.

This form of discourse has been invaluable in illuminating the structural aspects of religious life, and in helping us to make the necessary distinctions between religious virtue and psychological or corporate idiocy. But if it dominates reflection, it again hides death from sight and so exacerbates the problem which it is designed to solve. It always threatens to end in triviality. For example, when celibacy is justified on the grounds that it frees people to live for others, the observation is trivial. The striking point of celibacy is that it leaves us free to die for others. Religious have not the same obligation to consider their health and the dangers of situations into which they enter as would a married person, do not have to feel guilty when they risk their health, and hence are in a position not only to look death in the eye, but to spit it in the eye. No one put it better than Edmund Campion in his *Brag*:

And touching our Societie, be it known to you that we have made a league—all the Jesuits in the world, whose succession and multitude must overreach all the practices of England—cheerfully to carry the cross you shall lay upon us, and never to despair your recovery, while we have a man left to enjoy your Tyburn, or to be racked with your torments, or consumed with your prisons. The expense is reckoned, the enterprise is begun; it is of God, it cannot be withstood.

### *Conclusion*

The good words about religious life, then, emphasize a free life in the face of death. Unlike the bad words, they can commend freedom in living, and handle the everyday reality of death and its attendants: age, sickness and failure. When religious life is seen as centrally about that, it will be impossible to take religious formation too seriously. How, after all, do you form people to die?

But we can still say a little about religious formation, and indeed about final probation for an adult faith. Whatever else it involves, any adult religious formation should allow people to meet death as an everyday reality. So, periods of working with the old and dying, of entering situations of some danger where we must handle the fear of

death, of risking failure, have their place. Many people in our time, too, have rediscovered the power of the pilgrimage, where people must beg their food, sleep where they can, and experience in their bones the ways in which daily living follows and yields to nightly dying. In the pilgrimage, which is concerned with daily living and dying, the necessary small choices we make between the ways of trust and of self-defence ultimately make us ask about our gods and our God. The lines of Vincent Buckley's poem draw the lines of connection:

And what friends are they who, sweatmastered  
 at the thunder-fanned and burning bush,  
 will walk more cautiously saying, Oh, that  
 is the God you belong to; that the woman.  
 Oh, that. When the bush burns to ashes  
 I still must touch my forehead to the ground,  
 because its radiance is in my body.  
 If Gods are vulgar, so are journeys.

*(Ghosts, places, stories, questions)*

But working with the dying and pilgrimages are not programmes. They are opportunities for keeping death in mind and for celebrating life in such a way that death does not act as the lighthouse which prevents us from landing in dangerous places. If I may return to the experiences with which I began, Christian living and formation are indeed about facing death in order to live freely; formation is indeed a black comedy if you wish to script it, but a divine comedy if you wait to read God's script; the service of people in their extremity does indeed encompass our own death. The paradox is that those who are engaged with others at that depth commonly forget their own deaths. But then they can afford to.