
Introduction

Death practices in the United States are placing great demands on the time and energy of the clergy. At hospitals everywhere, clergy minister to the dying and their families. Both Protestant and Catholic clergy, including deacons and parish coordinators, are expected to attend wakes, preach at funerals, and, perhaps, accompany the family to the gravesite, where some final words of comfort will be offered. In the ensuing days and weeks, additional family counseling may be deemed necessary. At least two events among the many tragedies of 1996 demonstrated to me that there might be a need for a guide or manual to assist these functionaries in such situations.

At a funeral Mass for a police officer killed in the line of duty, the parish priest opened his homily by saying that he really *did not know what to say* about the officer's death. It is my belief that the question must be posed: Is it not part of this priest's vocation—or profession—to give this man's relatives and friends some explanation or analysis of the mystery of evil and suffering in the world? In another case, a former priest-author admitted in a book that he had never been trained to deal with people in a state of deep grief. His first wake was a disaster at which the young widow, mother of several small children, verbally attacked him because he could only think to ask, "How do you feel about this?"

Please understand, I am not saying that I, or any human for that matter, have solved the mystery of death and suffering. Clergy who must deliver a homily and speakers at memorial services face a daunting task. They themselves might be almost overwhelmed by a specific tragedy.

After the dormitory fire at my university (Seton Hall, January 19, 2000), a memorial service was held for the three students that died. Many words were spoken, and it is true that the emphasis was on faith

and trust in God's wisdom and love when trying to understand the mystery of the death of the young. Nevertheless, I am simply trying to show that this is a topic that humans have pondered and written about for centuries, and in this book I try to convey to speakers and even teachers some of these reflections.

The methodology of this short treatise is mainly philosophical. It is intended to complement scriptural and theological studies. I will leave to others the selection of relevant texts and authors in those areas. I am not discarding the consolation that comes from religious faith and divine revelation; rather, I am simply taking a different approach.

Unfortunately, in cases of suffering and tragic death, religious faith can be shaken and severely tested. Many people are only "nominal" Christians or Jews whose faith is weak and biblical knowledge marginal. Being told that it is "the will of God," while of course ultimately true, is not a satisfactory explanation for tragedy in the view of many people.

It is my hope that this guide will give clergy another source to fall back upon to supplement the religious. Many of the greatest "first level" and "second level" philosophers of the Western world as far back as Socrates and Cicero have meditated and written on the mystery of human suffering and death.

Twentieth century psychologists, psychiatrists (including Freud), and sociologists have made contributions from their own sciences. Novelists and poets have addressed the subject. Death and its results for the living come in many different ways and combinations. I hope this short compendium will be of service to a harried clergy, "other speakers," and eventually, if enlarged, will serve me and perhaps others as a textbook for thanatology courses.

My eight years as a seminarian in a Catholic religious congregation noted for its preaching ministry prepared me for a public speaking career as well as for the administration of the Sacraments and a clerical life. More than thirty years of teaching, research, and attendance at wakes and funerals prepared me to write this book, and while I have heard homilies on death at wakes and funerals of all the major religions, I have never heard a sermon on death at a Sunday Mass.

This led me to the conclusion that perhaps clergy wait until the dying process or death to broach the topic to survivors and family members. We hear people complain that the clergy do not talk about sin and hell anymore because they do not want to upset anyone. Could this be the same reason that few, if any, preach on the mysteries of terminal illness and death?

Is it not true that we are a society that is almost in denial concerning death? We do everything possible, societally speaking, to slow down the

aging process: health food stores, vitamin supplements, strenuous exercise, dieting, and face-lifts—the list could go on and on. I am not necessarily “putting down” these efforts, but I think they should not totally detour us from an awareness of the destiny we all face.

Even pagans, atheists, and agnostics have the courage to think and write about the inevitability of death. I would think, therefore, that people who believe in God and personal immortality could tolerate and survive a sermon on the topic.

Clergy should prepare their people to come to grips with the fact that relatives and friends will probably precede them in dying and death and that they themselves will one day have to endure it. The exit from this life can be sudden and easy or lengthy and painful, both physically and emotionally. If doctors such as Sherwin Nuland (1995), author of *How We Die*, are right, the dying experience is lengthy and unpleasant for some if not most people. His book contains a chapter that might be of interest, “Doors to Death of the Aged,” in which he describes the seven major “entities” that make up the “posse” that hunts down and kills the elderly.

Clergy should pose the question, “Why do we have to die?”—not what are the physical reasons, but rather why is it part of God’s plan for the human race? I think we all know some of the usual answers. We were not made for this world alone. Our ultimate destiny or end is supernatural: “enjoyment” of the beatific vision (God) for the “rest of eternity.” We have to make room on earth for new life. Since matter is intrinsically corruptible, a vital organ must sooner or later break down.

The part of that last statement that often presents a problem for the clergy is not the “later” but the “sooner,” since the death of the elderly does not represent a great mystery for most people. The mystery lies rather in at least two phenomena: the death of the young and the *manner* of death (terminal cancer, accidents, war) of people of any age.

Therefore, a sermon (or better yet a series of sermons) on dying and death demands some reflections on the problem of evil, human suffering, and the mystery of the will of God. Granted, these are among the greatest mysteries for philosophers and theologians, but this is no reason for clergy to ignore them. Some explanation is owed to the members of the religious community or other groups, even if it is, in the final analysis, inadequate. Clergy are supported by people who have a right to expect not only consolation on an emotional level, but some reason or reasons on the intellectual level. The serenity of the weekend “service” is a far better venue than a hospital room or wake.