

Humanizing the last breath: A Roman Catholic way of caring for the end of our days

Just as his Roman Catholic friends were unable to satisfy the teenage, atheist Joseph by proving him that God exists, so Joseph could not convince most of his buddies that our lives do not go on beyond the point of our demises.

A noteworthy level of uncertainty was not enough to put the teenage Joseph or his friends off from believing in what they believed in and not believing in what they did not believe in.

Joseph and his friends invariably seemed to be in agreement, though, on the fact that one day our earthly journeys will all come to a close.

Despite not satisfying the challenging standard of a “necessary conclusion” — a necessary conclusion is, according to Charles S. Peirce, “one which not only holds good in the existing universe, but would hold good in any universe whatsoever” —, the same author admitted that “there is far more solid knowledge in the predication that I shall die than there is in all the pure mathematics in the worlds [*sic*]”.¹

Death awaits us all, of course, but this is not necessarily to be welcomed as an addition to the repertoire of our calamities.

We have a rather telling example offered by the Roman Catholic Church.

As Jacques Maritain observed, “in the liturgy of the Catholic Church, the feasts of the saints are celebrated on the anniversary of their death, that is, of their real and definite birth”.²

While the teenage Joseph never met or read either Peirce or Maritain, he was sure he was on his way to dying; the same Joseph also harbored a longing to face death with arms wide open and die in peace.

¹ Charles S. Peirce, *Logic of the future: writings on existential graphs. Volume 1: History and applications*, ed. Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen, Peirceana, Volume 1 (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 445.

² Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 54.

Nevertheless, the very thought of death used to be sufficient to shake the atheist Joseph out of a peaceful state of being.

Is it not sane to hope for a peaceful death while not believing in God?

Joseph was a *compos mentis* human person: this was the case back when Joseph still thought of himself as an atheist, prior to having turned into a Roman Catholic, and this was the case after Joseph's conversion as well.

The atheist Joseph wanted to die in peace, but a peaceful life seemed to be all in all out of his reach — much of it because Joseph was aware he and others were more or less hurriedly going to die.

For the same Joseph, death used to stand for round-the-clock, sempiternal nonexistence, lasting all day and all night forever and ever: no God, no fundamental meaning of life — little meaning and perhaps no purpose at all — and, for sure, no soul; or, at least, no spiritual afterlife.

As the chances of passing away seemed more and more realistic and in light of all the pleasures of life — 'hardships be damned', our atheist used to say —, the prospect of death became increasingly uncomfortable in Joseph's mind.

The atheist Joseph searched for answers in general, not salvation in particular.

Joseph was determined to find some meaning and purpose in life — although, as an atheist, Joseph felt there was no hope of anything beyond the grave.

More than anything, Joseph hoped to find peace and to remain in peace until he had taken his dying breath.

Being told about salvation while standing at the window of a philosophical pub suddenly reshaped the life of the late Joseph, who attended the event to escape his inner turmoil during a time when despair was constantly on the skyline.

One person who had been speaking in the philosophical pub was a young Dominican from Latin America who loved St. Thomas Aquinas and was pursuing a doctorate on the late John of St. Thomas, born João Poinot.

Joseph barely remembered anything of the young friar's talk, let alone his name, but Joseph never lost sight of a teaching that the young stranger reiterated time and again: 'while the end of our lives is to be saved, our salvation is to be found in dying'.

Seeking direction and inspiration for living their earthly experiences, Roman Catholics walk a Christian path of salvation.

In the mind of Poinsoot, the purpose of the lives of Christian believers is "to secure [*grangear*] that hour", the hour of death, in which "their happiness begins".³

In light of Poinsoot's claim, a Christian path of salvation is directed to and inspired by death, the natural terminus of our earthly walks.

Since dying is seen as the decisive, irreversible birth and the dawning of our eternal bliss, Catholicism challenges us — and such a challenge may be the bedrock of Catholic end-of-life care — to face the culmination of our mortal adventure without alarm or apprehension, but instead with a sense of approval, celebration, and provision.

From a Roman Catholic standpoint, a human being is capable of prospectively contemplating his or her last breath as a final step towards the full actualization of their human potential, not as a point in time when they are being denuded of it.

While the late Joseph became a Roman Catholic and experienced an enduring peace of heart, one does not have to be a Catholic at all to appreciate having a peaceful flame burning in one's chest in the face of death: one could, for example, be a Muslim.

One needs only consult the Holy Qur'an in its 13th Surah to notice how highly Islam values peace, for Islam assures a magnificent last dwelling place to those who find peace in their hearts in the memory of God (Ayat 24-28).

Nevertheless, the late, Roman Catholic Joseph thought that a peace-filled heart signified the deepest proximity to Heaven a human could enjoy in life — and, for this reason, the late Joseph had in mind that a peaceful end-of-life meant nothing less than landing perfectly at home in the loving care of God's eternal breast.

³ Juan de Santo Tomás, *Explicacion de la doctrina christiana y la obligacion de los fieles en creer y obrar* (València, 1703), 243. Our translation.