Jaws of Death
Gate of Heaven

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PROJECT

CHAPTER 13

Christian Hope

To grasp this, we must consider hope in general, and then come to understand its significance in the relationship of Christians to eternity.

First, we must distinguish hope from all apparently similar attitudes (such as expectation and desire) and then distinguish between the hope of a nonbeliever and that of a Christian.

Finally, we must distinguish natural hope from supernatural hope, the latter being one of the three theological virtues.

The nature of hope

Hope is one of those basic attitudes without which human life would be unendurable, even impossible. I refer here to an attitude adopted in certain situations when we are faced with the uncertain outcome of an undertaking. In such situations, we hope for a favorable outcome even if all reasonable calculations are against it. This is especially the case when we are threatened with a great misfortune or when we are gravely concerned over the serious illness of someone we love. Despite our slim chances of escaping the misfortune in the first instance or of recovery in the second, we still feel hope.

Whenever he feels hope, even an atheist—or at least someone who reckons himself an atheist—is counting on the intervention of an all-good, all-powerful Being. Hope can exist even when misfortune seems inevitable according to the normal rules of cause and effect.

Hope is one of those basic human attitudes in which we see our primordial link with God—our undeniable metaphysical situation of creaturehood and our total dependence on God—win acceptance over all theories and opinions. We may speak and sometimes even think like an atheist, but in times of great danger we rely on the power and benevolence of God to save us. Our earthly life would be unendurable if we lacked this kind of hope—unless a deceptive form of optimism took its place.

Optimism differs from hope

The purely human form of optimism must be sharply distinguished even from the natural hope that we have been discussing. Optimists are like certain weighted toys: they always land on their feet when they fall down. People with hope, on the contrary, become more aware of things; their spirits rise when they break through the boundaries and limits in which they have enclosed themselves. A faint light rises to illumine everything taking place. Hope is a specifically spiritual attitude, an awakening in the face of great trials.

On the other hand, the human optimism that carries us through trials is based on a great illusion. It is not a spiritual attitude but a result of one's temperament; it is blind to the metaphysical situation of mankind.

People filled with genuine hope become more attractive by reason of that hope. Seeing them moves us, whereas those filled with a merely vital optimism (arising from their temperament) do not impress us at all. They definitely do not become more attractive, but, rather, they cause in us a certain amount of amusement.

Through hope, persons become more objective; they tower over the subjective world around them. Through mere human optimism, they be-

come subjective: they misinterpret reality and become victims of their own merely human tendencies and desires.[1]

Christian hope includes a value-response to God

Natural hope, already something noble, takes on another characteristic for a Christian. Christian hope does not, like natural hope, merely presuppose silently and objectively the Providence of a loving God.[2] It is based, above all, on a conscious, express response to a merciful God who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ.

This supernatural hope is most closely tied to prayers of petition that we address to an almighty, infinitely good God. We beg God to grant us the happy outcome of an event of great concern to us, or we beg Him to prevent some awful misfortune.

In other words, hope always contains a value-response. Even though its formal object is what is objectively good for me, hope is also a response to God's infinite goodness and to His loving kindness.

Right here lies the decisive difference between hope and all wishing and expectation. There is no value-response in expectation. The certainty that something will happen is a purely theoretical response, somehow rooted in our knowledge. Wishing, too, though it may be an affective response, is yet not necessarily a value-response.

We may hope for some outcome that is not only a great benefit to ourselves but also associated with important values, with things that are good quite independent of any good bestowed on us. This is also the case with wishing: we may wish for the success of some important enterprise just because it is good, and not because it confers any benefit on us.

1. Appendix B considers natural hope in greater detail and discusses the differences among hope, expectation, desire, willing, and wishing.

2. The limits of this present work make it impossible to elaborate a detailed distinction between a hope that only tacitly presupposes God and a hope based on a conscious belief in the God of Christian revelation. I have referred to this well-known distinction in more than one of my previous works in which I distinguished the Christian (or supernatural) form of morality from purely natural morality. Cf. the final chapter in each of the following books: *Ethics, Situation Ethics*, and *Graven Images*.

But in this present analysis of hope as a value-response, I am not concerned with what might be called the formal object of some response, whether hoping or wishing or willing. I refer rather to hope as a response to God's loving kindness. Like a prayer of petition, hope responds to the infinite goodness of God.

The value-response in hope is, therefore, unique, for it is not addressed to the value of some desired goal. It is addressed, rather, to God, the basis of hope, the Reality who makes hope meaningful and possible. Hope thus has quite a different relationship to value from the one we find in reverence, love, or adoration. The relationship in hope is our counting on the infinite loving kindness and almighty power of God. We have confidence and faith in these divine attributes. Thus, we touch now upon the close ties between faith and hope, a topic to which I shall return later in some detail.[3]

Christian hope is directed to our union with Jesus

The theological virtue of hope is directed toward an eternal, blissful union with Jesus and—in and through Him—with God the Father. This supernatural hope deeply modifies a Christian believer's view of death.

Eternal bliss is the highest objective benefit for a human being. This benefit presupposes an ultimate and ardent love of Christ and of God in and through Christ. The eternal, indestructible union of love with Jesus precisely constitutes the Beatific Vision, and it would not be beatific if we did not love God above all else.

Our hope of eternal bliss, therefore, presupposes the value-response of love for God. God himself desires this highest good for humanity and has intended us for it. If, through our own fault, we forfeit this good, this must be in God's eyes, too, a great misfortune.

When our concerns center around earthly benefits or misfortunes—hopes for the greatest good thing or the prevention of the most

3. Besides the difference between natural and supernatural hope, which I have already briefly sketched, there is another distinction to be made, which concerns the kinds of things that might be hoped for, the formal objects of our hope. Appendix C discusses these differences.

dreadful kind of misfortune—our prayers should always end with the qualification, "Yet, not my will be done, O Lord, but Thine!"[4] Our hope that God may grant us the good thing or avert the misfortune is also the basis of the act whereby we surrender totally to God's will.

When our hope concerns our eternal salvation, however, it makes no sense to pray, "Lord, grant me eternal bliss; yet, let not my will be done, but Thine." The point here is not that we are certain that we can pass safely though the judgment when we stand before God. We are in fact uncertain. It may be that we shall forfeit eternal union with God because of our sins. Yet this lack of certainty about our own salvation in no way is equivalent to praying, when it comes to our own salvation, "Not my will be done, O Lord, but Thine!"

We cannot doubt that God wants us to long for eternal bliss with all our heart. Not to do so would be a dreadful sin. Only through our sins—offenses against God—can we forfeit our eternal bliss.

In this context we must see that the thought that we might renounce our own eternal salvation for the sake of someone else necessarily leads to an absurdity. When St. Paul exclaims that he is willing to be damned if this would effect the conversion and salvation of his blood-brothers, the Jews, we must see this as a moving expression of his love for them. But such a renunciation, taken literally, is strictly impossible. There can be no trade-off here between some good for me that I renounce so as to procure some greater good for my brothers. At stake now is eternal salvation. The only way I can lose this, in contrast to any natural good, is through sin. It is absurd to imagine that God would "reward" with the eternal punishment of hell the almost excessive generosity of a person who loves others with such unselfish devotion.

No, our hope of eternal salvation presupposes not only the loving value-response to God; it also presupposes an awareness of the infinite, objective value of our eternal beatitude, which God wills, and which itself both presupposes and includes the glorification of God that takes place through us. We then can see that hope in our eternal beatitude

4. Lk 22:42.

differs from the hope directed toward all other beneficial goods for us. Moreover, we see its incomparable value because it is rooted in the highest, most fundamental value-response: the love of God and the love of neighbor.

CHAPTER 14

Christ Transforms Death

Christian hope places a completely different character on the face of death. For death becomes now the hour of our encounter with the Holy of Holies, Jesus Christ, in whose heart the fullness of the Godhead dwells. Death means the encounter at last with the God-Man, the Beloved of our soul, the One for whom we have been created.

As I have already stated, supernatural hope presupposes our ultimate love for Jesus and, in and through Him, for the Father. This love, too, plays its role in the new character that death assumes for the Christian. It is because we love God that death is the culmination of our life, the beginning of our true and eternal life. Love is the necessary precondition for our longing for the Beatific Vision as the summit of eternal happiness. Love turns the fearful, sinister death that threatens us—the shadow of death—into a blessed moment in which we are called to eternal life.

In the light of Christ's revelation, death takes on a completely new appearance: in Christ, in His teachings, and in His promises, the meaning for our existence shines forth clearly. We grasp that life on earth is a pilgrimage and life after death a blessed fulfillment. The light of Christ illuminates the darkness of death.

Without Christ's revelation, death could never appear in this unique light as our moment of fulfillment, and we could never hope for an eternal union of love with God. Never could this ultimate love of God blossom within us without the Incarnation, without the epiphany of God in the sacred humanity of Jesus. Indeed, without the sacrament of Baptism and the infusion of salvific grace into our souls, supernatural love could not develop within us.

Only through the light of Christ can death lose its dread and become the hour of the soul's marriage with its beloved Jesus. But for this to be realized, our soul must give the response of faith to Christ and to His revelation. To the degree, therefore, that our faith, hope, and love increase, the natural view of death—with its night of fear—will give way to the view of death as gateway to a blissful union with Jesus Christ.[1]

The relation between death's two supernatural aspects

I have said that the supernatural view of death includes two different aspects: it is seen as both the hour of our judgment and of our blissful meeting with the Bridegroom. Both aspects somehow coexist in the lives of saints. One aspect may be stressed over the other, but no one of them can ever be totally absent. Which aspect has the greater prominence depends above all on God—whether He wishes to test some soul through a night of holy fear or whether He wishes a blissful hope to bloom in the soul. Thus, when Hugh of St. Victor was dying, he is reported to have expressed his gratitude to God for the infinite grace of an imminent death filled with the most profound joy and vivid sense of longing. Such a death is a special grace from God.

The same blissful aspect of death can also be revealed in other ways. Thus, those present at the death of the great French Oratorian Alphonse Gratry reported their unmistakable feeling that a sun was sinking below the horizon as he died. Access to a person's soul after death is denied us,

1. I shall give a more detailed analysis of this point later on, when I discuss the great task every Christian has to replace the natural with the supernatural view of death.

not because the soul has ceased to exist but because we can no longer perceive it in the body left behind.

The relationship of the two supernatural aspects of death to one another is very different from the relationship of each one to the natural aspect of death. Rational certainty about the immortality of the soul (attained from the natural aspect of death) serves as a preamble to Christian certainty about immortality (which is based on faith and hope in Christ). The natural certainty (or, in many respects, the anxious concern about immortality) is transfigured by Christian faith into an existential reality that is constantly before our eyes.

I shall never forget the exclamations of my friend, the great philosopher Adolf Reinach, before he became a Christian: "Death is the most important moment in life! Dying is life's most important act!" Reinach was an ardent admirer of Plato's *Phaedo*, and we might be tempted to say that he was but paraphrasing Socrates. But Reinach was a thinker so focused on truth that the "words of the master" would never have moved him to make such an exclamation had he not grasped the illuminating truth himself. Through the force of reason alone he somehow understood that death is the beginning of our true life, a transition to our *status finalis*. But, lacking faith at the time, he did not see death as either the hour of judgment or of our blissful union with Jesus.[2]

This example of Reinach clearly displays the difference between the supernatural view of death afforded by the light of Christ, and the view afforded by rational certainty about the immortality of the soul. The light of Christ differs enormously from the noble but far dimmer clarity that true metaphysics diffuses.

And hope in Christ likewise differs greatly from the natural *sursum corda*—the "lift up your hearts!"—that we find in those enlightened by reason alone. Faith sheds upon us the light of Christ, and this reveals the Sun of Justice and the irresistible attractiveness of the One "who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."[3]

2. During World War I he found faith in Christ. A short time later, on November 16, 1917, he died on the battlefield.

3. I Pt 2:9.

Death's natural and supernatural aspects compared

Another difference now requires our attention: the difference between the supernatural view of death and an apparently natural aspect of death that we might call naïve—a view that looks upon death as something to be dreaded.

Specifically, how far should the view of death in the light of Christian belief replace the naïve view of death as something to be dreaded? Should death's fearful aspect be completely eliminated from the Christian consciousness? Or should it remain as something subordinate and partial, to be transcended victoriously by the Christian aspect?

Let us recall the warning the Church gives the faithful on Ash Wednesday when the priest marks our forehead with a cross of ashes: "Remember, man, you are dust and unto dust you shall return!" This dramatically shows the Church's insistence that, although the Christian view of death (which indeed is death's only true estimate) must be the definitive perspective for us, the natural view with all its dread should not disappear totally from our consciousness.

Eternal rest and perpetual light in death

That the Church's liturgy is aimed at the various aspects of death is but another sign of the greatness, truthfulness, and classical character of the liturgy. The Requiem prayer "*Requiem aeternam dona ei Domine*" ("Grant eternal rest, O Lord, unto Thy servant") emphasizes not only the prayer that the departed soul be saved from eternal damnation, but also that there be a cessation of all sorrows to which humans are subject on their pilgrimage through this valley of tears.

If the Church ended her prayer for the dead with just this part, the situation would be unsatisfactory and even very upsetting. But the prayer continues, "*et lux perpetua luceat ei*" ("and let perpetual light shine upon him"). This now includes reference to the person's existing in an eternity filled with the highest and most unimaginable conscious awareness.

It also illumines the true meaning of eternal rest spoken in the first

part of the prayer. Because of the second part (with its reference to perpetual light), there can be no misunderstanding of death as a mere cessation of all sufferings, as a mere end to strife and profound cares. The word "rest" seems to emphasize death as just such a cessation, upon the analogy of a peaceful sleep. But this affords a view only of the negative side of death.

Granted that it is a great gift, the cessation of all suffering and worries is still not bliss in any positive sense. We can see this in earthly experience: the happiness that comes from being cured of a serious illness is very different from the purely positive gift from God of rejoicing in a great love for another person. Thus, in the Requiem prayer, "perpetual light" points to the positive bliss of the departed soul, even as "rest" points to the end of suffering in the sleep of death.

Both views need to be expressed. With admirable realism the Church takes each into account. The cessation of all suffering is necessarily a part of eternal bliss, for "God will wipe away every tear."[4] These heartening words point to eternal life as precisely differing from life in this valley of tears.

The expression "sleep of peace" highlights another quality in the supernatural aspect of death, namely, that it marks a redemption, a harmonious state of being. Not "sleep" but, rather, "peace" is emphasized here, and this in a positive sense. For peace in a religious sense signifies not only the absence of all division and strife but also a heartwarming positive presence. Thus, the peace of Christ shines forth in a positive way when Christ greets the Apostles with the words "Peace be with you."[5] So, too, we say at every Mass, "Grant us peace."

The same spirit is found in the Franciscan greeting, "*Pax et bonum!*" ("Peace and salvation!") The peace of Christ contains the sweetness of our union with God, and it is an element of eternal bliss. The essence of the Redemption includes both the cessation of what is negative and the attainment of what is purely positive. The Redemption is primarily a liberation from our frightful separation from God. It contains our

4. Rv 7:17; 21:4.
5. Lk 24:36.

reconciliation with Him. Were it not for original sin and the countless actual sins committed on earth, no redemption would be necessary. The Redemption cleanses us from our sins, frees us from the chains of sin, and brings about our rebirth as new creatures in Christ.

Above all, however, the Redemption saves us from eternal damnation: it bestows salvation on us. We humans were incapable of salvation for so long as our race was chained in sin. But Christ's Redemption shatters the chains and opens for us the door to eternal bliss. The mystery of this Redemption is clearly inexhaustible. This one single word conceals a world of bliss. A product of the divine mercy, the Redemption is deeply linked to the mysteries of the Incarnation and of Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross. In the Redemption, we find liberation from all evils, the expunging of all guilt, and, above all, the illumination of eternal bliss.

Death as our true awakening

The supernatural view of death in a certain sense sees our earthly existence as a being asleep and considers death to be the beginning of our awakening. Death begins a mode of existence for our personal being that has an intensity and awareness beyond our ability to imagine.

Death begins that incomprehensible bliss of eternal union with Jesus that is suggested by St. Thomas Aquinas in his hymn *Adoro Te Devote:*

Jesu, quem velatum nunc aspicio,
Oro, fiat illud, quod tam sitio:
Ut, te revelata cernens facie,
Visu sim beatus tuae gloriae.

Jesus! Whom for the present veil'd I see,
What I so thirst for, O, vouchsafe to me:
That I may see Thy countenance unfolding,
And may be blest Thy glory in beholding.

Similarly, St. Teresa of Avila, in speaking of an advanced stage of mystical experience, compares its extraordinary ecstasy (which she describes as an elevation into heaven) to death (that is to say, with the bliss we hope to attain after death).

The transiency of life and the rhythm of decay

Earlier, we witnessed a mysterious contradiction inherent in the natural aspect of death. We must return to this feature in examining the relationship existing between the fearful natural aspect of death and the supernatural aspect: we experience, on the one hand, the transiency and impermanence of earthly things and, on the other, the hint or promise of an incomparably better world, a world of completion and fulfillment.

There is a bitter French adage that expresses the transiency of life and all earthly things, including the most touching and beautiful "*Tout lasse, tout casse, tout passe; il n'y a que le souvenir qui reste*" ("Everything declines, everything shatters, everything passes, and only memories remain"). This is a grim truth, never to be minimized or forgotten. At the same time, however, the very earthly experiences that move us to repeat the adage carry with them the hint and the promise mentioned above.

I speak here of experiences involving all great values: sublime beauty, deep loves, and above all, the transcendent splendor of true morality. All these shine forth with a promise of intransiency—of permanence.

Goethe rightly says of the blissful glance of mutual love that it must be eternal; otherwise it would be nothing.[6]

The human heart has an ambivalent attitude toward change and permanence. On the one hand, we seem to require change. If we cling always to one and the same old thing, we become indifferent to its value. We long for change, and we feel the attraction of what is new

6. Cf. *Faust*, pt. 1, ll. 3188–92, "*Lass diesen Blick, / Lass diesen Händedruck dir sagen, / Was unaussprechlich ist. / Sich hinzugeben ganz und eine Wonne / Zu fühlen, die ewig sein muss*!" ("Let this gaze, / This pressure of my hands express to you / What is ineffable: / To give one's whole soul and feel / An ecstasy that must endure forever!"), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy*, trans. Walter Arndt, ed. Cyrus Hamlin (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), 78.

and unknown. On the other hand, we also experience the tragedy of impermanence. We see change as something deeply painful. We think that only a superficial person would look upon change as attractive or desirable. Change is life's tragedy just as the bitter adage expresses it.

Complaints about change and impermanence often flow from sad experiences of life. How many lovers are there whose loved ones have proven unfaithful! How many serious promises have been broken by the fickleness of the human heart! How often does a change in circumstances cause something to lose its high value for us! How many good plans come to nothing! How many once promising conversions fail to be fulfilled!

We must see that many things are of their very nature unchangeable. In and of themselves, in their essence, values such as justice and kindliness cannot change; nor can the beauty of purity, the moving sublimity of trust and generosity. These bear within themselves the promise of an eternal existence that awaits us. Not only moral values but also the great beauty of art and nature, metaphysical truth, and, above all, love—all these are permanent in their nature, and all point to a world beyond this earthly one.

But the bearers of these values can and do change. They are subject to the rhythm of inconstancy and decay. A good man can experience grave moral failure, can forfeit his virtue. A splendid landscape can be destroyed by natural forces or by industrial "progress." A magnificent palace, a fine church, or a wonderful piece of sculpture can be destroyed. A painting of peerless beauty can go up in flames. This rhythm of decay permeates all the known world and is especially evident in the relentless rhythm of life and death that dominates all living creatures on earth.

Our longing for permanence

A similar rhythm often reaches into the human heart and causes to fade away those attitudes whose very essence and meaning are such that they should remain constant.

But this is not inevitably the case with all hearts. Decay and incon-

stancy do belong to the very nature of natural living things and render inevitable the rhythm of life and death and endless change. Not so with certain human hearts: some are constant. They embody attitudes whose essences point to eternity. They are faithful all life long. There are promises that are never broken and loves that last until the dying breath of the lovers, that exhibit a moving and absolute fidelity.

During our lifetime, therefore, two contrasting melodies sound in our ear: the song of impermanence and the song of eternal duration. They contradict each other only when one of them makes an all-encompassing claim. Reality presents us with some things impermanent by nature but also with other things that ought to endure. No doubt everything in life fades away. This is not tragic in itself, even if the process of fading away contains so many mysteries of a metaphysical nature. But there are other things that, although they can fade away, can and ought to endure. Something is wrong when they fail to endure.

Here we touch on the most profound aspect of our personal being; here the fading away becomes something tragic. There lives deep within the human soul a longing for the continuance of the soul, for eternal life. We seldom focus explicitly on the boundless benefit of personal existence, but at times it comes vividly before our minds. Like the peal of an organ, it echoes through our entire life.

Part of the tragic aspect of our earthly life centers precisely on the fading away of attitudes that can and should be constant. I am thinking here of our fidelity to God and to the persons for whom God has planted a deep love within our heart: how often have we ourselves allowed these to become faint, if not to fade altogether away! So, too, we witness a similar infidelity in others. Attitudes within them that should have endured forever come tragically to an end.

Even though their earthly bearers are all too changeable, the permanent things (such as metaphysical truths, moral values, and other values that are eternal) announce a message that contradicts the naïve aspect of our own death, the death of all other human beings, and, particularly, the death of those we deeply love.

Death's meaning as a punishment for sin

The light of Christ effects a radical change in the totality of our earthly life and, especially, in death. It changes also the two songs—of transiency and permanence.

In the light of divine revelation, death, which often enough is linked with great physical suffering, is a punishment for original sin.[7] According to Christian teaching, in the Garden of Paradise there was to be no death, with all its terror, but, rather, a blessed, peaceful transition from the *status viae* to the *status finalis*—from pilgrimage to final goal.

Precisely because death is a punishment, it loses the note of meaninglessness that characterizes the fact that a lower element destroys something higher and much more precious. There is a deep meaning to suffering understood as a punishment from God: it reveals God's basic attitude toward human guilt. Thus, out of the bleakness of the inevitable rhythm taking place apart from and beyond everything of value, death is inexplicably brought into the bright light of the great, basic contrast between good and evil.

Death's meaning as the moment of our judgment

The natural aspect of death undergoes a second change as a result of faith, a change even greater than its being seen as a punishment for sin. For after death comes the great decision about our eternal destiny. The need to die is now our common human destiny. It is the punishment for Adam's sin.

Still more important, the judgment that awaits each of us after death decides whether or not we shall put on the festive garment of eternal, unbounded happiness. Did a given man die in the state of grace, in the basic attitude of knowing and loving God? Or did he sin against the light, reject God—and then die impenitent? The judgment of each individual leads either to eternal damnation or to eternal bliss. We therefore

7. St. Augustine, *The City of God,* 13.7.

await it with both fear and hope.

From this perspective, death is not at all what it seems to be to a naïve, natural consciousness. Death now sorts out what really matters. Now what matters is how we have lived our earthly life. What has deeply moved us here? What have we done here? What have we failed to do? The worthless things, of course, which appealed to us because of some pleasant feature, now sink into insignificance. This is especially true of all the worldly interests that smothered us in so many details.

The deep questions, however, remain. Did we give to God's commandments the responses we should have given? Did we long to be transformed in Christ? Have we really tried to live according to this viewpoint? All such matters now take on a true, extraordinary, and profoundly valid significance.

Many of us fail to understand the importance our conduct has in God's eyes. We don't take ourselves (and our conduct) seriously. We deem anthropocentric the idea that our lives possess a moral and religious significance important to God. Indeed, we may allege it to be incompatible with God's infinite majesty that He should even notice our conduct, much less be "bothered" with it.

But this is a fatal error, a blind, stupid attitude. St. Augustine exclaims that God is a "*Deus vivens et videns*"—"a living and a seeing God."[8] God is infinitely holy. According to St. John, "God is love."[9] God takes humanity seriously, so much so that He attributes the highest significance to the question of moral good and evil. God, who knows everything, knows everything about each of us. We can conceal nothing from His perfect gaze. Thus the Psalmist says, "Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from Thy face? If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there; and if I descend into hell, Thou art there also!"[10]

Christ has himself taught us that the very hairs on our head are numbered.[11]

God's incomprehensible greatness is expressed by His taking seri-

8. St. Augustine, Sermon 69.3.
9. 1 Jn 4:8.
10. Ps 138:7–8.
11. Lk 12:7.

ously the humanity created in His image. This greatness finds, as it were, its highest expression in the absolute significance God attributes to the conduct of human beings. We are endowed with free will; we are confronted with the conflict between good and evil, with the axis of the spiritual universe. We must indeed tremble before God's judgment as before something awesome and crucial.

But how dreadful would it be if there were no divine judgment, if God were indifferent to sin, indifferent to how we used our free will! Does not God's judgment show forth His infinite love in the ultimate seriousness with which He regards the depths of our soul?

All these considerations show us that the light of revelation affords us a view of death far different from the naïve and natural view. Dying now is seen, not as a fearful and mysterious going down into nothingness, but as a door opening to the *status finalis* and to the fulfillment of our deepest longings. In Jesus, the mercy of God is illuminated for us. The Church prays, "*Deus, qui omnipotentiam tuam parcendo maxime et miserando manifestas*!" ("O God! Thy almighty power is made most evident in Thy mercy and compassion!")[12]

In accord with this prayer, that aspect of death that sees it as the door to eternal bliss should outshine all other considerations.

All Christians must strive to succeed in the great task of having this victorious aspect of death outshine the natural aspect of death's fearful inevitability. This latter view is a threat to death's glorious mission to allow the marriage of the soul with the Bridegroom. As we strive to make our own this supernatural view of death, our constant prayer must be: "May God grant us this grace—to be led by death to the Bridegroom!"

12. Prayer in the Mass for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost.

CHAPTER 15

Attaining the Christian View of Death

The strength of a man's faith determines the extent to which he will accept the glorious aspect of death. There are many degrees of faith: from a merely conventional faith (produced by the social environment, family, or national tradition), to a personal, living faith, all the way to the unshakable faith of the saints. They have the victorious faith that can move mountains and that includes a total commitment of their spirit and an absolute certainty of conviction about the things of faith.

The necessity of cooperation with grace

Although faith is a grace given to us by God, it nonetheless demands great cooperation on our part. We must be ready to receive and to accept revelation, and be free to respond to it. "Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed,"[1] says Jesus to the Apostle Thomas. Here, "seeing" refers to the natural ascertaining of a fact, such as Thomas's actually touching the wounds of Christ in His hands and His side. In this sense, seeing in no way implies understanding God's epiphany in the

1. Jn 20:29.

sacred humanity of Jesus—an understanding that forced St. Peter to his knees and led him to exclaim, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man!"[2] Those whose faith is praised are the very persons who give the correct response to the sacred humanity that the Preface for Christmas mentions: "By the mystery of the Word made Flesh, a new ray of Thy glory has shone on the eyes of our mind; that, while we know our God visibly, we may be drawn upward to the love of things invisible."[3]

In our response to God's epiphany we have free choice. Many of us flee from grace. We shut our soul when God knocks. Others, however, freely surrender, open wide their souls to receive God's gift, and pray for an increase in faith. Faith demands cooperation on our part: "He who made thee without thee will not justify thee without thee" ("*Qui ergo fecit te sine te, non te justificat sine te*").[4] These words of St. Augustine are applicable also to the gift of faith. It is freely offered to us in the first place, but it will not take root, grow, and flourish without our own free cooperation. Thus, the very words of Christ point to our personal responsibility: "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved, but he who does not believe shall be condemned."[5]

We take upon ourselves a frightful guilt when we fail to respond to Christian revelation and to God's epiphany in Jesus. That we are responsible for our lack of faith proves that faith is not a pure gift from God, like some charismatic grace. The fact, moreover, that we are obligated to pray for an increase in faith again proves the necessary link between our faith and our own free will. To the extent, therefore, that our faith is lively, strong, and unshakable, we will accept the true and valid blissful aspect of death as a blessed union with Jesus.

2. Lk 5:8.

3. "*Quia per incarnati Verbi mysterium nova mentis nostrae oculis lux tuae claritatis infulsit: ut, dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur.*"

4. St. Augustine, Sermon 169 (sometimes known as Sermon 15): "*De verbis Apostoli.*"

5. Mk 16:16.

Ways to increase our faith in God

The link between our faith and our free cooperation with God's grace is a mystery. Once again, we touch here the coincidence of opposites that I have mentioned several times previously. On the one hand, faith is a pure gift, something we could never give to ourselves. On the other hand, it is also a free response on our part. These two facts are mysteriously intertwined. Beyond all doubt, faith is both a gift and a free response.

It remains a great mystery, however, how these two essential elements of faith, which at first glance seem contradictory, come together in the one reality of our faith. For our present purpose, it suffices that we realize that we must utter constant prayers for an increase in faith and thus achieve the full cooperation, on our part, for a faith that continues to grow and to become ever more firm and unshakable. Only in this way can we be truly convinced of the blissful aspect of death as revealed in the words "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh!"[6]

The framework of this present book does not permit a detailed analysis of the urgent necessity that men have to cooperate freely with the gift of faith. I can mention here only a few basic points.

We must, above all, protect our faith from all temptations to doubt. From the lives of many saints, of course, we learn that God often inflicted on them severe tests of faith. But our concern here is with those "tests" that we can blame on ourselves alone. Thus, thanks to a presumptuous evaluation of our own strength, we may read books hostile to faith, books that turn us away from Christ and the true Faith. To counter such dangers, we must cherish and preserve our faith as a precious gift from God; and in all humility we must be aware of our weaknesses.

Moreover, we must accord to inner prayer an important place in our life. Turning in a contemplative way toward Jesus, we must enter the depths of our soul and unite ourselves with Jesus in a reverent, loving way. This means that we must seek to be unencumbered, that we must turn away from the things surrounding us so as to concentrate on the

6. Mt 25:6.

absolute reality of God. When we become silent, when we let God speak, we can strengthen our faith. We open ourselves more and more to the experience of being drawn to the Father.[7]

Spiritual reading, too, provides helpful nourishment for the soul and for the growth of faith. Some word of Christ, some saying of an Apostle or a Church father, can suddenly light up a particular moment in the life of a saint. And how much this can contribute to an increase in our faith!

Finally, we must open ourselves to grasp God's message that is given through all the great natural benefits that come to us. We must let ourselves be led by the beauty of nature and art into God's presence, so that we see all things *in conspectu Dei*—in the framework of His existence and presence and light. We must allow ourselves, as it were, to walk along the inner path that leads also from all moral values to God. Again, we must heed the message God gives us in the deep happiness of loving and being loved, the happiness of a deep mutual affection. We must insert our earthly loves into the framework of God; we must love our neighbors "in God."[8] We must strive to "renew all things in Christ."[9] These are all decisions based on our own free will, and they, too, are a way for us to grow in faith.

Faith transfigures death but is also important in itself

To the extent, then, that faith is the axis of our life, is strong, alive, and deeply personal, the glorious aspect of death will triumph in us over the fearful and anxious aspect. But we must not misinterpret this truth as saying that a strong and unshakable faith is to be valued simply as a means to ensure the triumph of the glorious aspect. Quite apart from its altering greatly the aspect of death from dreadful fear to glorious and blissful union with the Bridegroom, faith in itself brings us something of immense value. Faith as such is incomparably more important and

7. Cf. Jn 6:44.
8. Cf. the "*amare in Deo*" of St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.9.
9. Cf. the "*instaurare omnia in Christo*" of Pope St. Pius X, from Eph 1:10.

infinitely more valuable than its being merely a means to let us see death in a supernatural light—as wondrous and as beneficial as this is. Faith is our principal response to God and to divine revelation, to Jesus and to God's epiphany in Him, to eternal and absolute truth. The glorious, supernatural view of death is only a fruit of faith, never a motive.

We ought to have faith because by our belief in God we give the response to which He is entitled. We ought to believe in divine revelation because it is absolute truth. Just because the supernatural view is true, it must victoriously replace the natural aspect. Its absolute, supernatural truth must illuminate the great mystery of death and dispel the natural shadows.

Nothing would be more absurd than for us to regard the subjective happiness that results from the supernatural view of death as an end, and to see faith as a means for obtaining this end. To do so would mean detaching from truth both faith and the supernatural view of death. Such a pragmatic interpretation of faith comes close to a total misunderstanding of it. We must, therefore, condemn as blind nonsense the idea that, because it cheers and comforts us, a supernatural view of death is worth nourishing even if it is an illusion. Faith gives comfort only if it is true.

Love of Jesus also transforms our view of death

The dominance of the supernatural aspect of death in our souls depends not only on the degree of our faith but also on the degree of our love for Jesus, and for the Father in and through Jesus. Here, too, important gradations are to be found, from the upward glance of reverence all the way to a love filled with ardor and longing. Only when our love for Jesus becomes intense and our longing for union with Him becomes the very center of our lives (surpassing all other kinds of longing, yearning, desiring, or hoping) can the supernatural view of death victoriously eclipse the natural view. Only then can it triumph over the dread and pain of our being forced to depart from all the great goods that have given us happiness on earth—particularly our ardent communion with beloved persons

and, above all, with the person we love most. Death's aspect is altered for us to the degree that we love Jesus and impatiently long to see Him face to face. A greater love for Him, a deeper and more unencumbered love, a stronger and more impetuous longing for complete union: such will change the face of death from dread to blissful fulfillment.

The natural aspect of death includes such fearful elements as the dreadful wasting away of the body, the disappearance of the entire reality around us, and the transition into a completely unknown situation. But all these things fade into the background against our longed-for, blissful union with the infinitely Holy One, the source of our joy, the Person loved more than anyone else. To the extent that our love for Jesus is unconditioned, limitless, and impatient, death's fearful aspect fades into the background—but it does not totally disappear.

Death's natural horrors must never be underestimated

We here touch on a general law of our personal existence on earth. In all matters, the natural aspect of something must never be ignored but must, rather, be given its full weight and then eclipsed by the supernatural aspect. This means, for example, that we should not consider earthly suffering to be a beneficial good because it allows us to bear a cross joyfully with Christ and for His sake. Suffering should not be esteemed a replacement for things that naturally bring joy and also not for beneficial supernatural gifts such as charismatic graces. The character of the Cross *as cross* should not be eliminated from Christian life. Certainly we can endure joyfully a physical suffering for the sake of Christ, but the suffering does not thereby cease to cause pain; it is not changed into a sense of physical well-being.

There is a constant temptation here. We are human. Our transformation in Christ should not mean that we somehow cease to be human. The purely human, natural aspects of life must be faced and experienced even as we must transcend and outgrow them. We give a woefully incomplete response to the death of a beloved person, therefore, if we only rejoice; it may be that the dead person was like a saint and thus may confidently be

expected to be enjoying eternal bliss. Even so, the human heart cries out with Virgil, "Here, tears are called for!"

When a beloved person dies, joy is an inappropriate response, in which we err in several respects. First, we ignore the reality of our frightful separation from her, our being robbed of her presence in this life. Second, we ignore the misfortune that death represents for the dead person herself. Related to this, we sometimes hear of persons who rejoice on being told that they will soon die of their lingering illness. Such persons run the risk of becoming giddy enthusiasts. They act as if death were not a great misfortune on the natural plane, as if death did not represent a form of punishment. They come dangerously close to ignoring the proper fear of the judgment.

The proper attitude toward death

The correct attitude toward death, I repeat, is otherwise. We must experience, we must pass through, all the fearful elements rooted in the natural view of death. For death is a punishment; it brings us to the judgment; it involves a fearful separation. It is hollow to short-circuit these things and go immediately to the blissful aspect of death reflected in the phrase "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh!"[10] Although the yearning for a blissful union with Jesus is sublime in itself, its reality must appear only at the end of a complete and authentic progression. Tears must come first.

Many pietistic poems and verses tend to ignore the natural aspects of death and to speak at once of the joys of eternity, with the inevitable result that such joys ring hollow and lack full reality. I think of such exclamations as "O beloved hour, ring out the end of life!" or "I am disgusted at still being alive!" Bach set these verses to music that is far more serious and full of life's real resonances than are the words themselves. How far superior are these lines from the *Stabat Mater*:

10. Mt 25:6.

Quando corpus morietur,
Fae, ut animae donetur
Paradisi gloria[11]

While my body here decays,
May my soul your goodness praise,
Safe in your eternity.

In my book *Liturgy and Personality*, I analyzed the virtue of *discretio* and showed the necessity of our passing through certain stages in our relationship to other persons.[12] Something similar is at stake here in this question of the natural and supernatural aspects of death. We require a response to the total reality of death. The existential completeness of our response demands that we give to human tears the full weight of their sorrow before the eternal bliss of union with Jesus is allowed to dry them.

In summary, then, I say that the authentic attitude toward death—the God-intended attitude—is one that takes into account all the aspects of death according to an inner order of precedence. It is also one in which the blissful, supernatural aspect has the final triumphant word.

The supernatural view reveals the hierarchy of values

As we have already seen, the true hierarchy of all things shows up clearly when we recognize our life as a pilgrimage and when we go through this earthly life turned in hope toward our destination. Thus, far from making earthly life less significant, our having a supernatural view of death makes it far more significant. Let us consider this in greater detail.

The supernatural view will effect changes in our estimation of things. Many take on greater significance; others, far less significance. In the light of eternity, our conduct becomes in many ways more meaningful. Much that had at one time engaged our attention or disturbed us now

11. Sequence for the votive Mass of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a composition by Jacopone da Todi.

12. *Liturgy and Personality* (Steubenville, OH: Hildebrand Press, 2016), 79–94.

becomes less important. We might say that the true order of importance of things—the real hierarchy of being—becomes more clearly etched for us in the light of eternity; in fact, only in this light is the true hierarchy evident.

I do not speak here of the hierarchy of values in general, as if only in the light of eternity are we able to know that Beethoven's ninth symphony is superior to his first, or that murder is a far greater moral evil than theft. My meaning here goes in a different direction: in the light of eternity, we come to understand that our first indispensable task in this life, our highest obligation, is that we not offend God. According to the words of Christ, love of God ranks first of the two commandments upon which the whole Law and the prophets depend.[13] This love is manifested especially in our giving no offense to God.

The one thing necessary (which Christ pointed out to the busy Martha) clearly is seen in the light of eternity to be our love of God.[14] And this implies, first, that we not offend Him by sin and then that we direct toward Him all the other manifestations of our love (which necessarily include our love of neighbor).

St. John of the Cross affirms that we shall be judged according to the degree of our love. He thus indicates the hierarchy we must ever keep in mind. All things related to the moral commandments enjoy an implicit superiority of rank, as well as a quite different importance, over all other achievements of whatever greatness and value. Compared to our moral rectitude, to our freedom from sin and our love of God, how truly unimportant and transient are so many of the things that engage us here so mightily! We think far too much of professional rank, reputation, and financial prosperity.

On the other hand, the light of eternity in no way diminishes the significance of really important earthly goods, such as the fate of persons close to us, above all those to whom we are bound by a special kind of love. What God wants of us in a particular situation gains significance through our expectation of eternity and our longing for eternal union

13. Mt 22:36–40.
14. Lk 10:38–42.

with Jesus, and with the Father in and through Him. Moreover, the light of eternity increases the significance of small proofs of love and concern for others, even as it shows how everything worldly is relatively unimportant.

Only when we think of death—and of earthly life—in the supernatural light of eternity can we see the true rank of things. Only then can we appreciate the relatively trivial importance of so many things that, although they are morally legitimate, possess no real value but belong instead to the sphere of the merely agreeable.

The supernatural view increases gratitude for God's gifts

Moreover, I must emphasize that there are many gifts of God that, through their value, are a source of happiness for us on this earth, and for which deep gratitude is the proper response.

Among these we could mention the recognition of profound truths, the enjoyment of beauty in nature and art, and, above all, our deep, loving communion with other humans—in friendship, marriage, or in family relationships with parents, brothers, and sisters. We should fully appreciate all these benefits.

Gratitude is one of the fundamental responses owed to God. Indeed, it includes appreciation of these good gifts that God has showered upon us as well as our enjoyment of these gifts and our grateful recognition of their role in our happiness. The light of eternity makes us all the more aware of these gifts which have graced our pilgrimage.

Our impetuous and impatient yearning and love for Jesus can only enhance our grateful appreciation for His loving kindness in granting us such good things.

Death's approach calls us to eternal concerns

There is need now to distinguish between two situations in our earthly life that call for different responses on our part. I refer to all those times when we are in relatively good health, able to discharge our normal du-

ties, and to those other times when a serious illness, possibly fatal, overtakes us.

When relative health prevails, we must face the day-to-day tasks that are involved in our work and normal duties. They are then our theme. We are forced to focus our attention on all the details of daily life, no matter how much the supernatural view of death dominates our soul, no matter how our hearts long for eternity. To be sure, we must see all these daily tasks in their relation to eternity; we must shift worldly concerns to the background. In the spirit of St. Paul's advice, we "have no anxiety."[15] Nonetheless, attention to daily tasks is a part of the business at hand.

The focus changes, however, when we are felled by a serious illness that threatens to be fatal. Our focus now is on dying. Tasks that had hitherto engaged our attention have less importance in our eyes. Into the foreground of our consciousness comes the need to prepare for a good death, to assume in "the hour of our death"[16] an attitude that accords with God's wishes.

This total orientation toward eternity does not, however, involve a turning away from those we love. Quite the contrary! Just as the pain remains of our imminent separation from them, so, too, our love for them should take on a special kind of glow. Our closeness to eternity raises everything up to a solemn majesty. The light of eternity makes our heart more aware of those we love, more tenderly conscious of how much we love them. Even as our heart overflows with love for the Bridegroom—so soon to come!—our love for particular persons comes into even fuller bloom. At death's approach, everything nonessential fades away. Everything else becomes truer, more valid, and conclusive.

Faith and hope help us attain the supernatural view

As we have seen, God invites us—and wills us—to move past the natural, naïve view of death and to embrace the supernatural view implicit in the expression "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh!" Our acceptance of this

15. Phil 4:6.
16. Conclusion of the Hail Mary.

invitation makes a significant difference for our earthly happiness. It also has great value in itself, since it is in agreement with revealed truth. It is, moreover, the fruit of our complete and profound living faith and of our ardent love for Jesus. This blissful supernatural view of death, therefore, belongs essentially to our transformation in Christ.

I have noted, however, that achieving the supernatural view is not entirely under our control. Neither is faith itself nor ardent love for Jesus. Each of these is in the first place a gift, something beyond our freedom to obtain. But each also demands a fundamental cooperation on our part. I mean now to analyze the role of our free cooperation in our gaining and deepening the supernatural view of death.

Our hope, which here on earth is directed toward eternal bliss, will vary according to the intensity of our faith and our love for God. The greater and more comprehensive our faith, the more impatient and ardent our love, the greater will be our supernatural hope. This hope presupposes faith in the continued existence of our soul.

True enough, we can be certain of our immortality through natural reason. But faith teaches us in quite a different way. By faith we know not only that the soul shall continue to exist, but also that through death we will attain our final and permanent way of existence. In faith we have responded to revelation that tells us about the great alternative that awaits us after death: eternal damnation or eternal bliss (whether immediately after death or after a stay in purgatory).

Faith, moreover, responds to the revelation of God's infinite mercy, as expressed in Jesus's words on the Cross to the repentant thief: "Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise."[17] The same truth about God's mercy underlies the verse in the *Dies Irae* that pleads: "*Salva me, fons pietatis*!" ("Save me! O fount of mercy!")

The infinite mercy of God, therefore, is something revealed to us, along with the sobering truth that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."[18] Through faith we know of God's mercy. This knowledge through faith is the very foundation of our hope of eternal

17. Lk 23:43.
18. Heb 10:31.

bliss. But love also has a relation to hope. Our impetuous love for Jesus and our ardent desire for union with Him in a blissful, eternal present—this gives hope a central place in a highly meaningful way that is still quite different from faith. We may say that faith strengthens hope while love nourishes it.

Hope has two basic elements. The first is concerned with attaining a goal and thus is very similar to expectation. The second element deals with the positive value of the thing hoped for, the happiness for us that is related to the object of our hope. We may have expectation of some misfortune, but we never hope for it. Hope thus has something in common with mere wishing, since what it expects is always something good and beneficial.[19] But what chiefly determines the character of supernatural hope is that it absolutely counts on the intervention of Providence. Such hope allows us to regard death as a transition to eternal bliss and not to eternal damnation. All the while we are conscious of the fact that this bliss is the gift of God's mercy.

The supernatural view eliminates temptations to suicide

The Christian view of death includes our full understanding of the morally required response to God. The supernatural view of death as the hour of judgment links it in a unique way with the question of moral good and evil. We cannot separate our being answerable to God from our moral conduct on earth. Nor can we separate the awareness of our responsibility from our faith in God as an absolute and righteous judge.

Our faith, therefore, has a clear understanding of the dreadful sin of suicide. Suicide loses all the attractive plausibility that it might have had when considered from the naïve view of death. It is extremely important that we grasp how the supernatural view of death and of judgment before the personal God radically changes the natural view of suicide. For, notwithstanding our hope in God's mercy, our holy fear of the judgment includes a lively awareness of the sinfulness of suicide.

19. Cf. Appendices B and C.

Besides the judgment, the supernatural view of death stresses also that death is the beginning of our eternal, blissful union with Jesus. Suicide from this point of view, too, is understood as a serious sin and an offense against God. It stands in absolute contradiction to our eternal union with the One who said, "You are my friends if you do the things I command you."[20]

Various steps are necessary for each of us to overcome the natural view of death and to replace it with the Christian perspective, which must include, as I have already stressed, a clear awareness of the sinfulness of suicide. This is particularly urgent for those who, by reason of their natural temperament, are especially tempted to suicide. They need to be made conscious of the fact that if they are stained with the sin of suicide, they cannot be justified in the sight of God and, indeed, that they will be excluded from eternal bliss. They must grasp the fact that suicide actually thwarts the healing of their sorrow and, in truth, makes it impossible for them to attain the goal they are seeking.

This is above all true of one who suffers a profound sorrow over the death of a beloved person. The longing for death here is highly intelligible and, in a sense, justified. But suicide as a way of solving the emptiness and longing is senseless. Those who long for death and see it as an easy way out of sorrows and troubles must somehow come to see that suicide is a totally unsuitable way of escape. How could a fearful sin possibly help us escape from the dreadful sorrows of this life into a better place in which our tears are wiped away? The truly liberating character of death excludes all suicide, whether direct or indirect. What is uniquely frightful about the sin of suicide is that it is committed at the instant of the conclusion of life, with hardly the possibility of contrition that all other kinds of sins have. Through suicide we close off the way to the very place we desire, where tears and sorrows vanish.[21]

20. Jn 15:14.

21. This is true, of course, only in the case of a suicide carried out in a free and cold-blooded manner. It is not valid, however, for the countless cases in which, for example, suicide is a consequence of a nervous breakdown or mental disease. In such cases, sinfulness is diminished or entirely absent.—Ed.

As Christians, moreover, our longing for eternal union with Jesus necessarily includes the awareness that we belong to Christ and not to ourselves.

We must always be mindful of the truth that the question of our eternal bliss will be decided by our conduct in this life, and that our transformation in Christ has to be accomplished here on earth. Suicide is incompatible with our transformation in Christ, therefore, not only because it is a sin but also because our arbitrary termination of our own life destroys the possibility of our glorifying God through the full interval of time He has designated as the length of our pilgrimage. Suicide robs us of the chance to work for our own transformation.

Finally, those persons contemplating suicide should recognize that earth is not just a valley of tears. As the liturgy says of Creation, "The heavens and the earth are filled with Thy glory, O God!" Such persons need to understand how indispensable is gratitude for the correct response to God. Gratitude is a prerequisite for our eternal bliss; it necessarily forms part of all those earthly gifts that are included in our transformation in Christ.

We must pray now for a death pleasing to God

Our constant prayer for growth in faith, hope, and love contains implicitly a prayer that we may die in a way pleasing to God. It contains also the request that the supernatural view of death may gain victory in our consciousness, so that we may see death as the gate to an eternal, blissful union with Jesus and with the Holy Trinity in and through Jesus.

Holy sobriety, which is also a basic component of holiness, reminds us of certain serious dangers and temptations that may befall us concerning death. Death may come suddenly and unexpectedly. Or else our spirit may become weakened after a long illness, so that we find ourselves unable to pray in full alertness, unable to throw ourselves into the arms of the merciful God.

Holy sobriety teaches us to use wisely the times of our physical

health. While we are still able, we must concentrate our thoughts on eternity. We must fully experience remorse for all our sins while, at the same time, we implore God's pardon and mercy.[22]

22. We must also never forget how swiftly the possibility for prayer or remorse may cease: we might suffer a fatal heart attack or die in our sleep. I have myself experienced in an instant the fading away of my life's strength and even my consciousness because of a serious circulatory problem. Such things can happen so quickly that we have not even the time to call upon Jesus in a final, hasty prayer. Only a second marks the transition from full consciousness and well-being to the night of unconsciousness. There is not even time to think about what is happening. We experience only the swift disappearance of all our vital signs.