

Meditation 1: Our Lady of a Happy Death

Dear pilgrims,

This morning, you left Paris and set off for Chartres, with this pilgrimage of Christendom which is rich in so many spiritual promises. Your approach to these few days will be emblematic of all human life. And when we walk, as we all know, our first priority is to keep our goal in mind, otherwise we will wander in vain. So we propose that we meditate on the pilgrimage of our human life, and first of all, on the goal towards which it tends, eternal happiness. We want to live well, says Saint Augustine, but living well can only be understood as living always: “bene vivere” is “semper vivere”. But then, precisely, our aspirations come up against the unavoidable fact of death.



Major ideas

- We must have a Christian view of death
- We must remember that, ultimately, we are nothing but dust
- We recall the announcement of the Messiah and his Holy Mother
- We see how Mary is with us at the time of death
- We remember the paths of life that lead to the good death: the scapular, the first 5 Saturdays...

Mortality

Dear pilgrims, this moment of spiritual quest that we are experiencing now, is favourable for meditating on death; on our death, and on what will follow it. Thinking about death is difficult for many of our contemporaries, and probably for us, too, at least to some extent. “Men,” Pascal once wrote, “having been unable to cure death, misery, and ignorance, have decided, in order to make themselves happy, not to think about them.” Our modern society multiplies entertainment in order to “not think about death”. We try to forget it by stultifying ourselves with pleasures, by masking its reality, and also by programming it with the drama of euthanasia, which is another way of controlling it, to avoid the unknown time and manner of its arrival.

But the Christian knows by faith that death is not the end of human existence; it is the end of bodily life only, the separation of the two elements of the human compound, the soul and the body.

The book of Wisdom clearly states: “God did not make death, he takes no pleasure in the loss of the living. He created all things to be.” The Church teaches that “our first parents Adam and Eve were constituted in a state of “original holiness and justice.” [...]As long as he remained in divine intimacy, man should neither die nor suffer.” Subjected to temptation by the devil, “a murderer from the beginning,” the first human couple disobeyed their Creator and, thereby, broke the alliance with him. The consequences were dramatic: the loss of original holiness, the revolt of the body against the spiritual faculties of the soul, the discord between man and woman, the broken harmony with creation, and finally bodily death. “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This is how death “entered the world”, as Saint Paul says.

But, in this same dark page of the story of origins, a ray of light appears, a divine promise of Salvation. Even before the sentences which condemn the woman and the man, God said to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your descendants and her descendants; he will crush your head, and you will strike at his heel." Tradition saw in this sentence the first proclamation of Salvation, the "protevangelium": it is the proclamation of a redeeming messiah, of a fight between the serpent and the woman, and of the final victory of the descendant of Eve.

God kept this promise given at the very beginnings of humanity: this woman, according to many Fathers and Doctors of the Church, is the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and for that reason preserved from the stain of original sin and without any personal sin, the first effect of the redemption accomplished by her Son, Our Lord. She was intimately linked to the work of Salvation, "associated with a maternal heart to the sacrifice of her only Son, giving the consent of her love to the immolation of the victim born of her flesh," and this is why she has a mission to bring the riches of Salvation to souls. Given at the foot of the cross by Christ Jesus as mother to Saint John, and through him to all the faithful; thus we are all invited to take her into our homes. Eve was the "mother of the living", the origin of humanity, but she transmitted to her descendants a human nature marked by sin and death. On the contrary, Our Lady is the Mother of those who live the divine life. As Christ is the "new Adam," principle of a new regenerated humanity, Mary is the "new Eve," who is intimately associated with him.

Our Lady at the hour of our death

Mother of the living, Mary is the one who assisted – accompanied - her Son himself, in the dark passage of death; she now has a special role to fulfill among Christians who must also pass through the doors of death. All of us, dear pilgrims, have the hope of Mary's help at the time of death; that's what we say in the final words of the Angelic Salutation: "Pray for us, sinners, now and at the hour of our death." The faithful instinctively understood the importance of placing their spiritual interests in the hands of their Mother at the moment of death, whatever their awareness of their faults, because she is all merciful and all powerful over the heart of God. It is said that to encourage his companions who were going to be shot with him, Charette (one of the leaders of the Catholics in the Vendée, resisting the Revolution) pointed out to them, while reciting the Hail Mary: "Today and the hour of our death: these are now the same thing for us."

Mary, for her part, "having completed the course of her earthly life, was raised body and soul to the glory of Heaven and exalted by the Lord as Queen of the universe, to be thus more entirely conformed to her Son, Lord of Lords, victorious over sin and death." Since her Assumption, Our Lady has been able to fulfill her protective role throughout the world and watch over the life and death of each of her children.

Some testimonies of Mary's maternal concern for us.

Our Lady of a Happy Death

For more than two centuries, the Virgin has been honoured under the title of Notre-Dame du Bien-Mourir in Fontgombault, in this Benedictine monastery in Bas-Berry founded by Pierre de l'Étoile in 1091. A stone statue represents the Virgin in majesty and holding the divine Child on her knees. For a long time, it was Notre-Dame de la Porte, placed above the north portal. At a dark hour, the abbey having been sold to the Revolution as a national asset, an

unfortunate man dared to attack the venerable statue to bring it down, but he suffered badly: he had a serious fall, from which he died shortly after. God's Justice? Certainly, but justice which without eliminating suffering, knows how to transform it into love: Our Lady obtained his repentance and his conversion. So she was henceforth invoked under the title of Our Lady of a Happy Death. Very often, people came from neighbouring parishes to recommend dying people to her, and through her intercession, numerous Christian graces were obtained at the hour of death, as well as miraculous healings. Our Lady of a Happy Death thus protects us in this passage of death, she obtains graces of conversion and appeasement.

The scapular of Mount Carmel

During the Crusades, Latin hermits established themselves on Mount Carmel, in Palestine, to live in retreat in the very place where the prophet Elijah had retired. They were recognized by Saint Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem, then approved by Pope Honorius III. This new order, the order of Carmel, spread throughout Christendom. In the mid-13th century its superior was an English Carmelite, Saint Simon Stock. He had a vision, probably on July 16, 1251, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel: the Virgin appeared to him surrounded by angels, holding a scapular in her hand, and said to him: "Here is a sign for you and a privilege for all Carmelites: whoever dies in this habit will be preserved from eternal flames." Saint Simon Stock died around 1265, but the wearing of the scapular became very popular following several miracles of conversion at the time of death. Saint Louis himself wore it in secret, and the popes approved this devotion and enriched it with indulgences.

But you may be wondering what the scapular is? It was originally a garment worn by certain religious people above their tunic, which covered the shoulders and went down to the feet. There is a shorter form for lay people: two squares of brown wool (which may include an image of the Virgin and Christ), connected by laces, and worn around the neck. To benefit from the main promise, one must receive the scapular from the hand of a priest, and wear it at the time of death.

The Virgin also promised that she would come and deliver from Purgatory, on the Saturday following their death, the souls of people who, in addition to wearing the scapular, have preserved chastity according to their state (complete chastity in celibacy, marital chastity in marriage), and who have recited the divine office (or the small office of the Blessed Virgin) every day; this last obligation (quite difficult to ensure) can be changed by the priest who imposes the scapular, for example, to the daily recitation of the rosary. This is called the Sabbath Privilege.

The five first Saturdays

Closer to us, at the beginning of the last century, the Virgin appeared in Fatima, to three shepherds, to ask them to pray for peace. She also delivered a prophetic message about the future of the world and the Church. The oldest of the children, Lucy, entered Carmel, and on December 10, 1925, she had an apparition of the Blessed Virgin with her Heart crowned with thorns. She said to Sister Lucy: "Tell all those who, for five months, on the first Saturday, confess, receive Holy Communion, say a rosary and keep me company for fifteen minutes meditating on the mysteries of the Rosary with the aim of make honourable amends, that I promise to assist them at the hour of death with all the graces necessary for the Salvation of their souls." The Lord later made Sister Lucy understand that this practice came to repair the five kinds of offenses against the Immaculate Heart of Mary: against her immaculate conception, against her virginity, against her divine maternity, the offenses of those who divert her children and those who attack her images.

Dear pilgrims, why not resolve, at the end of this pilgrimage, to receive the scapular and engage in this beautiful devotion of the 5 first Saturdays of the month? Our Lady of Christendom invites you, with the “Salve Corda” alliance, to mobilize to launch “First Saturday groups” at home, in your parishes, to implement this request from the Virgin at Fatima. You will find all the information you need in your booklets after this meditation.

Dear pilgrims, these considerations on death may seem austere to you; they underline the seriousness of our Christian life. When we walk, it is important to know the goal, as we said, and then do everything possible to achieve it. We will only reach Heaven with the grace of God, which never fails those who humbly ask for it. On this journey, and especially when it comes to an end and we have to go through death, the Lord gave us his Mother to assist us, and it is she who allows us to remain serene and full of trust in the divine mercy.

Recitation of the Prayer to Our Lady of a Happy Death

“Our Lady of a Happy Death, Mother of Jesus and our Mother, it is with the simplicity of little children that we come to you to entrust you with our last moments and our death. With Jesus, you assisted Saint Joseph, your husband, during his death; at the foot of the cross, you received the last breath of our Saviour, your divine Son; from now on, we have the assurance, you are with each of your children, with the solicitude of your maternal heart, to help them cross the threshold of death and introduce them into eternity.

But, so that we can face this final test in peace, though it is so harsh to our nature, we ask that you be also for us, Our Lady of Good Living. Help us, we implore you, to remain faithful, day after day, to the commitments of our baptism, to the teachings of the faith, to the practice of charity. To achieve this, we rely, with the certainty of hope that does not disappoint, on your almighty intercession.

Our Lady of a Happy Death, receive our thanksgiving now, which we will repeat to you eternally, and deign to continue to pray for us, poor sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

[All references, for all the meditations, may be found in the French Pilgrimage book, along with the original French texts. AP-S, translator.]