

A LESSON FROM THE SAINTS

Contempt of death is one of the few things in which we differ from the saints. They pass through it, and find sweetness in the expectation. They help us reduce it to a science by teaching us a new meaning for the word preparedness, which for us commonly means time to make our peace with God by summoning His priests that we may receive the sources of spiritual health and strength. Calling this a happy death in the strict sense we may evoke a useful train of thought.

If we examine the chronicles of the Dominican Order, we shall find that the holy deaths therein recorded have not only these common features of preparedness; they are marked by a downright cheerfulness. Cheerfulness and death are not usually held to be sociable ideas. But in the case of God's heroes, why not? The mission of Christ our Lord was to lead men to heaven. The vocation of Saint Dominic, in founding his Order, was to carry on that mission not only by explaining the guide-book of the journey, but by blazing the way with a shining example.

This cheerfulness has been evidenced in many ways. Examples fill volumes. God has granted some a fore-knowledge of the hour of death; heavenly visitants have brightened the death chamber of others; some have been known to sing, to pray aloud with the community, to laugh, and even indulge in refined humor in the face of death. The courage of the martyrs is especially comforting.

When Blessed Reginald of Orleans, to whom Our Lady gave the scapular of the Order, was offered the sacrament of Extreme Unction, he could make this reply: "I do not fear the assault of death since the blessed hands of Mary anointed me in Rome. Nevertheless, because I would not make light of the Church's sacrament, I will receive it, and humbly ask that it may be given me."

Blessed Antony of Pavone, an inquisitor for the Faith and a preacher much hated by the Waldensian heretics, went to a barber one afternoon and asked to be shaved well, as he was going next day to a wedding. The barber insisted that there was to be no wedding, since he knew all the gossip of the town; but next day the holy friar was martyred, his body being hacked to

pieces by seven armed men. His heavenly nuptials have been attested by many miracles worked at his tomb.

Saint Peter of Verona, who wrote in his own blood, "Credo in Deum Patrem Omnipotentem," went joyfully through the wood where his assailants lay waiting, although he had been forewarned of their attack. And his story of holy courage has been repeated in the lives of more than twenty-six thousand martyrs who up to the sixteenth century wore the white and black habit and died for the Faith of Christ.

To Blessed Sadoc fell the lot, coveted by Saint Dominic for himself dying among the Tartars. "At Sandomir the passion of forty-nine martyrs" had appeared the preceding day in letters of gold on the page of the Martyrology. He was put to death, together with his forty-eight preaching brothers. The custom of singing the Salve at every Dominican's deathbed thus took its rise.

When Pope Saint Pius V. was asked on his bed of pain to diminish his mortifications, he replied: "My friends, would you have me, then, in the few days that I have yet to live transgress the rule which God has given me grace to observe inviolate for fifty-three years?" This indomitable spirit, echoing, as it were, "It is consummated," and "I have fought the good fight," has characterized the sons of Saint Dominic from the beginning.

Finally, we are not ignorant of our Holy Father's own happy death. He himself led the way; his life was one of ceaseless prayer and labor; he spent himself for Christ, and Christ received him into glory. During his whole life he had sighed for martyrdom. Once having unwittingly escaped the enemy's trap, he grieved that death had been denied him, and he afterwards told those who had sought his life that, if caught, he would have asked for a slow death—to be cut up piece by piece—that he might thus share more of our Saviour's sufferings. When his end finally came, there was no sorrow, save in the hearts of those surrounding him. For them it was the departure of a friend and father; for himself it was the homecoming of a pilgrim. He was among his own; his work was done; and the evening of life brought him rest and peace. His manner, therefore, was one of joy. We have it on the word of an eye-witness, Father Ventura, at the time Prior of Bologna: "In all his sufferings he showed a marvelous patience, making no complaint, not even groaning, rather did he seem full of gaiety and happiness."

This gaiety, as we have observed, seems to be characteristic of Dominican deaths as it is of every true Dominican life. It was Father Didon who defined the spirit of the Order as one of "self-sacrifice, uprightness, bright gaiety and truth." And if we seek the reason of this gaiety, we are touching the very secret of the Order's genius. Perhaps it is due to the special maternal care of Our Lady, who at least four times has been revealed to Saint Dominic and his children as our heavenly custodian. Perhaps it is due to the broadness of Saint Dominic, who would not have his rule to bind under sin, lest it become a burden instead of a help—that rule which Saint Catharine calls "so broad, so joyous and of so sweet a savor." Perhaps it is due to the confidence imparted by the very character of the Order, whose purpose is the dissemination of sound doctrine, whose motto is **Truth**, whose glory is the incontrovertible teaching of Saint Thomas.

At any rate, it is fitting that God should thus cheer the deathbeds of His faithful servants, if for no other reason, to give them the hundredfold promised even in this life, and to comfort those still languishing in the flesh. It is not strange, then, that we do not celebrate the saints' birthday, but their death-day, the birthday into glory. Their religious life has been a sort of guarantee of a happy death, and their habit not a shroud of death but the wedding garment of eternal life. Conscious of their pilgrimage and crusading to a heavenly Jerusalem, they won their spurs of sanctity, which is the truest fulfilment of humanity; and they show us by their unbroken friendship with God the true meaning of the word preparedness, the secret, mystic science of a happy death.

A science calls for three things; general principles, accurate facts, and the facility of discerning facts in principles and principles in facts. Now we have all three. Our Saviour laid down the principle. "If any man keep My word, he shall not taste death forever." What is His word but the holy gospel containing the evangelical counsels on which every religious rule is written? Here, then, is the principle. The facts are the happy deaths of all the saints. There is but one element remaining, the discerning of these facts and principles. We may therefore say broadly that whoever can see these happy deaths in the promise of our Saviour, and can read that promise in these facts, may be said to be skilled in the science of a happy death.

—Bro. Constant Werner, O. P.