

THE ART OF DYING WELL

By

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TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN BY

REV. JOHN DALTON

Written in 1619 by St. Robert Bellarmine
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Preface of Bellarmine

Being now free from public business and enabled to attend to myself, when in my usual retreat I consider, what is the reason why so very few endeavour to learn the “Art of Dying Well,” (which all men ought to know,) I can find no other cause than that mentioned by the wise man: “The perverse are hard to be corrected, and the number of fools is infinite.”⁴ For what folly can be imagined greater than to neglect that art, on which depend our highest and eternal interests; whilst on the other hand we learn with great labour, and practise with no less ardour, other almost innumerable arts, in order either to preserve or to increase perishable things?

Now every one will admit, that the “Art of Dying Well” is the most important of all sciences; at least every one who seriously reflects, how after death we shall have to give an account to God of everything we did, spoke, or thought of, during our whole life, even of every idle word; and that the devil being our accuser, our conscience a witness, and God the Judge, a sentence of happiness or misery everlasting awaits us.

We daily see, how when judgment is expected to be given, even on affairs of the slightest consequence, the interested party enjoy no rest, but consult at one time the lawyers, at another the solicitors, now the judges, and then their friends or relations. But in death when a “cause” is pending

⁴ Eccles. 1:15

before the Supreme Judge, connected with life or death eternal, often is the sinner compelled, when unprepared, oppressed by disease, and scarcely possessed of reason, to give an account of those things on which when in health, he had perhaps never once reflected. This is the reason why miserable mortals rush in crowds to hell; and as St. Peter saith, “If the just man shall scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”⁵

I have therefore considered it would be useful to exhort myself, in the first place, and then my brethren, highly to esteem the “Art of dying Well.” And if there be any who, as yet, have not acquired this art from other learned teachers, I trust they will not despise, at least those precepts which I have endeavoured to collect, from Holy Writ and the Ancient Fathers.

But before I treat of these Precepts, I think it useful to inquire into the nature of death; whether it is to be ranked among good or among evil things.

Now if death be considered *absolutely* in itself, without doubt it must be called an evil, because that which is opposed to life we must admit cannot be good. Moreover, as the wise man saith: “God made not death, but by the envy of the devil, death came into the world.”⁶ With these words St. Paul also agrees, when he saith: “Wherefore as by one man sin entered into this world, and by sin death: and so death passed upon all men in whom all have sinned.”⁷ If then God

⁵ 1 Peter 4:1

⁶ Wisdom 1:13- 2:24

⁷ Romans 5:12

did not make death, certainly it cannot be good, because every thing which God hath made is good, according to the words of Moses: “And God saw all things that he had made, and they were very good.”

But although death cannot be considered good in itself, yet the wisdom of God hath so *seasoned* it as it were, that from death many blessings arise. Hence David exclaims; “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints:” and the Church speaking of Christ saith: “Who by His death hath destroyed our death, and by His resurrection hath regained life.” Now death that hath destroyed death and regained life, cannot but be very good: wherefore if *every* death cannot be called good, yet at least some may. Hence St. Ambrose did not hesitate to write a book entitled, “On the Advantages of Death;” in which treatise he clearly proves that death, although produced by sin, possesses its peculiar advantages.

There is also another reason which proves that death, although an evil in itself, can, by the grace of God, produce many blessings. For, first, there is this great blessing, that death puts an end to the numerous miseries of this life. Job thus eloquently complains of the evils of this our present state: “Man born of a woman, living for a short time, is filled with many miseries. Who cometh forth like a flower and is destroyed, and fleeth as a shadow, and never continueth in the same state.”⁸ And Ecclesiastes saith: “I praised the dead rather than the living: and I judged him happier than them both, that is not yet born, nor hath seen the evils that

⁸ Job 4

are under the sun.”⁹ Ecclesiasticus likewise adds: “Great labour is created for all men, and a heavy yoke is upon the children of Adam, from the day of their coming out of their mother’s womb, until the day of their burial into the mother of all.”¹⁰ The Apostle too complains of the miseries of this life: “Unhappy man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”¹¹

From these testimonies, therefore, of Holy Writ it is quite evident, that death possesses an advantage, in freeing us from the miseries of this life. But it also hath a still *more* excellent advantage, because it may become the gate from a prison to a Kingdom. This was revealed by our Lord to St. John the Evangelist, when for his faith he had been exiled into, the isle of Patmos: “And I heard a voice from heaven saying to me: Write, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. From henceforth now, saith the spirit, that they may rest from their labours: for their works follow them.”¹²

Truly “blessed” is the death of the saints, which by the command of the Heavenly King frees the soul from the prison of the flesh, and conducts her to a celestial Kingdom; where just souls sweetly rest after all their labours, and for the reward of their good works, receive a crown of glory.

To the souls in purgatory also, death brings no slight benefit, for it delivers them from the fear of death, and makes them certain of possessing one day, eternal happiness.

⁹ Eccles. 4:2,3

¹⁰ Eccles. 40

¹¹ Rom. 7:24

¹² Apoc. 14:13

Even to wicked men themselves, death seems to be of some advantage; for in freeing them from the body, it prevents the measure of their punishment from increasing.

On account of these excellent advantages, death to good men seems not horrible, but sweet; not terrible, but lovely. Hence St. Paul securely exclaims: “For to me, to live is Christ; and to die is gain having a desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ:” and in his first Epistle to the Thessalonians, he saith: “We will not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that are asleep, that you be not sorrowful, even as others who have not hope.”¹³

There lived some time ago a certain holy lady, named Catherine Adorna, of Genoa; she was so inflamed with the love of Christ, that with the most ardent desires she wished to be “dissolved,” and to depart to her Beloved: hence, seized as it were with a love for death, she often praised it as most beautiful and most lovely, blaming it only for this that it fled from those who desired it, and was found by those who fled from it.

From these considerations then we may conclude, that death, as produced by sin, is an evil; but that, by the grace of Christ who condescended to suffer death for us, it hath become in many ways salutary, lovely, and to be desired.

¹³ *Thess.* 4:12

Chapter 1

He Who Desires To Die Well, Must Live Well

I now commence the rules to be observed in the art of dying well. This art I shall divide into two parts: in the first I shall speak of the precepts we must follow whilst in good health; in the other of those we should observe when we are dangerously ill, or near death's door.

We shall first treat of those precepts that relate to virtue; and afterwards of those which relate to the sacraments: for, by these two we shall be especially enabled both to live well, and to die well.

But the general rule, "that he who lives well, will die well," must be mentioned before all others: for since death is nothing more than the end of life, it is certain that all who live well to the end, die well; nor can he die ill, who hath never lived ill; as, on the other hand, he who hath never led a good life, cannot die a good death. The same thing is observable in many similar cases: for all that walk along the right path, are sure to arrive at the place of their destination; whilst, on the contrary, they who wander from it, will never arrive at their journey's end. They also who diligently apply to study, will soon become learned doctors; but they who do not, will be ignorant.

But, perhaps, someone may mention, as an objection, the example of the good thief, who lived ill and yet died well. This was not the case; for that good thief led a holy life, and therefore died a holy death. But, even supposing he had spent the greater part of his days in wickedness, yet the other part of his life was spent so well, that he easily repented of his former sins, and gained the greatest graces. For, burning with the love of God, he openly defended our Saviour from the calumnies of His enemies; and filled with the same charity towards his neighbour, he rebuked and admonished his blaspheming companion, and endeavoured to convert him. He was yet alive when he thus addressed him, saying: “Neither dost thou fear God, seeing thou art under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done no evil.”¹ Neither was he dead when, confessing and calling upon Christ, he uttered these noble words: “Lord, remember me when thou shalt come into thy kingdom.” The good thief then appeared to have been one of those who came last into the vineyard, and yet he received a reward greater than the first.

True, therefore, is the sentence, “He who lives well, dies well;” and, “He who lives ill, dies ill.” We must acknowledge that it is a most dangerous thing to deter till death our conversion from sin to virtue: far more happy are they who begin to carry the yoke of the Lord “from their youth,” as Jeremiah saith; and exceedingly blessed are those, “who were not defiled with women, and in whose mouth there

¹ Luke 23:40-41

was found no lie: for they are without spot before the throne of God. These were purchased from among men, the first-fruits to God and to the Lamb.”² Such were Jeremias, and St. John, “more than a prophet;” and above all, the Mother of our Lord, as well as many more whom God alone knoweth. This first great truth now remains established, that a good death depends upon a good life.

² Apoc. 14:4-5

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