

MEDITATIONS
ON
DEATH

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ON
DEATH
PREPARING FOR
ETERNITY

THOMAS À KEMPIS

Translated by
FR. ROBERT NIXON, OSB

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“Man is like to vanity: his days pass away like a shadow.”

—Psalm 143:4

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Translator's Note

A popular and venerable saying, variously attributed to Socrates, Plato, and Cicero, asserts that “the whole of the life of the wise person should be a preparation for death.” This principle, if evident even to the pagan sages of antiquity, is of greater pertinence to those enlightened by the truth of the Gospel. For if an eternity of either ineffable bliss or of horrendous torment awaits each soul after its departure from this world, then our preparation for this departure is quite literally the most important duty of our present life. And, whereas all else in life is inherently uncertain, death is an unalterable and inescapable reality which each human being must sooner or later face.

Throughout the entire tradition of Christian spirituality, the contemplation of death has been a virtually ubiquitous practice, and it is universally recommended by the saints and Doctors of the Church. As one example among many, Saint Benedict, the patriarch of all

monks of the West, wisely counsels the spiritual seeker to “keep death daily before your eyes.”¹ For nothing else is more efficacious in moderating our earthly desires, in promoting awareness of the eternal destiny of the immortal soul, and in imparting courage and consolation in the face of adversity and tribulation. For it is mindfulness of death alone which puts our mortal life into its proper perspective.

The practice of meditation of death assumed particular prominence in late-medieval spirituality (that is to say, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). The reasons for this were many—including the multitude of calamities (such as war, plague, and famine) which afflicted Europe at the time, the rapid rate of social change and the prevailing political instability. Also included is the rediscovery and popular circulation of the writings of the ancient philosophers, especially Plato, Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius.

The greatest and most representative spiritual writer of this rich and complex era was arguably Thomas à Kempis (1380–1470), best known as the author of the ever-popular classic *The Imitation of Christ*. Thomas, who was of humble birth, commenced his religious life in the Brotherhood of Common Life, an association of men

¹ *Rule of Saint Benedict*, 4:47.

(primarily students and scholars) who lived a kind of quasi-monastic life in community, without being bound by permanent vows. Following this, he entered the Canons Regular, and he was ordained a priest after completing the necessary course of studies and formation.

Thomas was an avid copyist of manuscripts, reproducing by hand the entire Bible no less than four times, as well as copying the complete works of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, and many others. He was also an extraordinarily prolific author, and his works (which span several weighty volumes in the multitude of editions of them which have appeared) encompass the genres of spiritual and moral treatises, homilies, didactic works, hagiography, and poetry. Despite the immense popularity of *The Imitation of Christ*, many of his wonderful writings remain untranslated to this day.

This volume contains a short but extremely powerful work attributed to Thomas à Kempis, offering a moving, profound, and vivid meditation upon death and the “Four Last Things” (i.e., the event of death itself, the Final Judgment, the torments of hell, and the happiness of heaven). The present English rendering is a translation from the Latin text of the 1523 Paris edition, published by Jocodus Badius Ascensius of the *Opera Thomae a Campis* (*Works of Thomas à Kempis*).

It is to be noted that the attribution to Thomas is not entirely certain. This uncertainty of attribution is not at all surprising when one considers that Thomas generally preferred, out of his characteristic humility, to circulate his works anonymously. Indeed, even most of the early manuscript copies of the *Imitation of Christ* itself do not indicate any author.²

Nevertheless, these *Meditations on Death* are entirely consistent with the focus on eschatological and ultimate realities to be found in Thomas's writings and other authors of the period. If Thomas did not write them, then they are certainly the product of someone of the same era, and imbued with the same passionate but down-to-earth approach to the spiritual life.

The two brief poetic interludes, or canticles, which appear in part III are translations of excerpts from the *Cantica Spirituala* (*Spiritual Canticles*) of Thomas, a collection of short spiritual poems or songs. These works appear in virtually all of the editions of the collected works of Thomas (including the 1523 edition noted above) and are certainly his authentic works but have never before appeared in English. The versions offered

² It is interesting to note that in the current Roman Breviary, the readings taken from the *Imitation of Christ* do not name any author for the work.

here emulate the regular rhyme schemes of the original Latin texts and, for this reason, exercise a considerable degree of literary freedom. The translator hopes that any shortcomings or deficiencies in these will be attributed entirely to himself, but whatever is found to be meritorious and edifying may be credited to Thomas.

For many contemporary readers, the idea of a booklet³ of *Meditations on Death* may well seem slightly morbid, macabre, or even depressing. But this is not truly the case at all. For death is an essential part of life, and the contemplation of death is, in fact, simply an honest recognition of the finitude of our own mortal condition. It is only through coming to terms with the reality and inevitability of death in time that we can come to appreciate the true significance and value of life in eternity. The relationship between life and death may seem paradoxical or contradictory, yet it is necessary and essential.

In our contemporary culture, there is often a tendency to conceal or deny the reality of human mortality. Yet this “death-denying” culture is, ironically, also one that often systematically denies life itself, through

³ Thomas à Kempis intended his works to be read as such since he uses the term “Libellus,” or “small book.” Like many writers of the period, he generally divides his texts into short, readily digestible chapters.

practices such as contraception, abortion, euthanasia, and same-sex marriage.

Sacred Scripture tells us that “if we die with Christ, we shall also live with Him. If we suffer with Him, we shall also reign with Him.”⁴ May the courageous and humble contemplation of death help us to shun sin and to cultivate virtue; may it help us overcome the temptations and allurements of that which is passing and ephemeral and help to strive instead for that which is eternal; and may it empower us to “seize the day”—both by making the most of our earthly lives and by yearning constantly for the beatitude of heaven, the glory and splendor which “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived.”⁵

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, her most chaste spouse Saint Joseph (the patron saint of the dying), and all the holy angels and saints assist us in this endeavor through their unfailing intercession, guidance, and example.

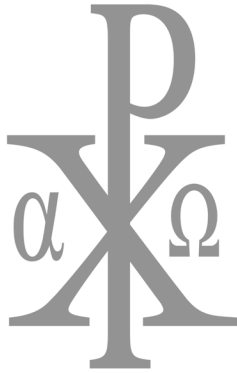
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⁴ 2 Timothy 2:11–12.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:9.



PART I
REFLECTIONS ON
THE LAST THINGS



Consideration of One's Own Death

My friend, it is most useful for you to call to mind frequently and assiduously the reality of your own death. This, indeed, is the one universal reality of our human condition—for in this life, some are rich while others are poor, some are masters while others are servants, some learned while others are simple, and some are blessed by happiness and good fortune while others are struck down by misfortune and calamity. Yet all face death with equal certainty. And though death itself is a certainty, its time and manner of arrival are profoundly uncertain.

So consider firstly the uncertainty of the year, month, day, and hour of your death. Death often arrives with no or little warning, coming like a thief in the night or

descending upon us unexpectedly, like a falcon swooping upon a hapless dove. Often it arrives on the occasion you least expect it, and at the time when you are least prepared for it. Very often death comes to a person when he still expects to have much longer to live and looks forward to an abundance of time in which to repent for his sins, to amend his vices, and to improve his life and conduct.

My advice, therefore, is to live as if you could die at any moment and to live each day as if it could be your last. And be mindful that this is no idle or hypothetical speculation or a mere morally edifying imagining but a frighteningly real and imminent possibility at all times! In fact, it is not a possibility only, but it is a *certainty*. For while everything else in the future course of your life—your success or failure, your prosperity or poverty, your happiness or wretchedness—are unknown, hidden, and indeterminate, *death* is the one thing of which you may be absolutely sure.

Consider also, the severe weakness and debility which often precedes the actual event of death. This debility and weakness is truly nothing other than a herald of our mortality and the oblivion which will engulf our earthly being. The period of severe illness which precedes death for many is not, indeed, the ideal time for repentance.

Apart from its extreme uncertainty of duration, it is generally a time when the spirit and the mind are gravely weakened and strong resolutions have become virtually impossible. And if one is confined to bed, genuine emendation of one's life is hardly meaningfully possible at all. For the person confined to bed and in the throes of physical and spiritual dissolution can hardly undertake any real works of piety or penance.

Thus "deathbed repentance" is inherently uncertain in its efficacy since its sincerity is not demonstrated or supported by any works or reformation of life. It *may* be efficacious in some instances, but it cannot be relied upon since not even the person concerned can be certain of the genuineness of their contrition.

Consider next your own self in your dying moments, and reflect upon the stains on your conscience, your unatoned sins, and your unamended vices. These will all flood into your heart as a bitter torrent at that fateful time, like a river of regret or a stream of sorrow. And each unatoned crime and unconfessed sin will painfully prick your heart, like a sharp and uncomfortable thorn. How much you will then long for another year of life and health, or even another day or another hour, in which to atone and amend yourself!

O mortal, reflect carefully upon that unknown time when you will come to your final hour, and when the lethal hand of death will fall upon your shoulder, and when you will be compelled to cross that dark stream from which none have ever returned! When you enter into the realm of eternity, your whole past life will seem like a mere moment and appear to be like an insubstantial dream from which you are now awakening. Reflect upon the immense pain and torments which await so very many (countless multitudes, in fact), and often all for the sake of some passing, momentary pleasure, be it the gratification of the physical senses or the appeasement of pride and vanity. Reflect also upon the infinite joys and blessedness which those condemned will have lost forever. This irreparable and infinite loss is, indeed, perhaps more severe an affliction than any of the other torments which could be imagined.

Consider also how bitter will be the separation from all those you love, and the extreme and everlasting dishonor of eternal condemnation. In this world, human beings make enormous efforts to acquire honor for themselves and seek avidly to attain happiness in any form possible. Yet how few make any comparable effort to attain the glory which lasts forever and to secure for themselves the happiness which never ends!

Think also about the fate of your earthly body, this lump of clay out of which has been formed by the hand of God. For indeed it shall rot and decay, and grow black and putrid, withering away to nothing and eventually crumbling to dust. And at the point of death, a multitude of demons will appear before you, ready to seize upon each departed soul. With gaping jaws and grasping hands, these shall be like “roaring lions seeking whom they may devour.”¹

Next, consider how the condemned soul must pass to a region entirely unknown to it, where a multitude of cruel and vicious demons shall viciously await it. It shall then long to return to its body. But it will be entirely unable, for all the windows and portals of entrance and exit thereto are now forever closed. Yes, an unpassable abyss lies between the realms of the living and the dead!

Instead, the condemned soul will find itself in an immense cavern of utter and impenetrable darkness, fetid and heavy with all the charnel odors of the grave. And the various evil spirits of each of the vices shall seek it out to torment it. Thus the spirit of pride shall hunt down those who were proud during their lifetime, and

¹ See 1 Peter 5:8.

the spirit of lust shall seize upon those who were lustful. And so it will be for vices of every kind, each vice having its own particular tormenting spirits. And the nature of these tormenting spirits will correspond to the vice which they punish. Thus, the infernal spirit which punishes pride shall constantly mock and humiliate its victims, whereas the demon which punishes sloth will compel them to undertake incessant, arduous, and unending labor.

Finally, consider how after the moment of death, you shall have to stand before that most awesome tribunal of judgment to await your eternal sentence. This final sentence, once pronounced by the immortal Judge, can never, ever be revoked or changed. For indeed, it is written in Holy Scripture that “wherever the tree falls, there it will lie.”²

Consider also how your mortal body, upon which you have bestowed such care and love whilst you lived, will be enclosed in a cold and soon-to-be-forgotten tomb. Your very self will be consigned to perpetual oblivion, at least as far as this world is concerned. You will be just like a guest who has visited for one day and then left, and whom no one remembers!³

² Ecclesiastes 11:3.

³ See Wisdom 8:5–12.

But for those who have lived holy and upright lives, and who have prepared themselves diligently by prayer and penance, the situation will be very different indeed. For when they realize that they are about to pass from this world of sorrows, this valley of tears, they will not fear at all. On the contrary, they shall rejoice knowing that they are about to depart from their true native land of heaven, and there to enjoy unending and infinite bliss in the company of glorious angels and saints, illuminated by the magnificent and glorious radiance of the Holy Trinity Itself.

And the cause of this joy is nothing other than the fact that they carry with them the testimony of a clear and innocent conscience. Exultantly they shall ascend to the realm of everlasting happiness and peace, departing from the miseries of this present world without a single shadow of regret. For there shall be no bond of earthly concupiscence or carnal desire which enchains them to this lower realm, and they shall feel not a single pang of sorrow or regret to bid this world of time and space a final farewell.