

Ars Moriendi

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In the Beginning

Perhaps I should begin by saying that the origin of this paper lies in the discussion of the North European diffinitors when they met last year to begin thinking about this General Chapter. We met in Edinburgh, one of the most northerly houses of the Order in Europe, in October as the all-enveloping darkness of a Scottish Winter began to make itself felt, and in a city known for its particularly gloomy Calvinist establishment. So perhaps there was a certain inevitability about our finding this topic. What I want to say is partly drawn from our conversations in Edinburgh, and from our correspondence with each other since then, and partly from the depths of my own sense of mortality.

I suppose we should also take into consideration the fact that one of the provinces represented at that meeting, Flanders, doesn't have a single novice or brother in formation at present, and has had no ordination for two years. Only two men have been professed there in the last 25 years. Houses are closing, projects are dying. The Dutch province also has its difficulties: having had 600 members in 1957, it now has about 190, and most of these are old men. One novice was professed three years ago, and now they are asking themselves whether they can receive any more. They have had to sell the Albertinum, one of their major historical projects. It's hardly surprising that the Dutch diffinitor, Ben, asks "Are we coming to the end of religious life?" This is certainly the impression given in some parts of the world. The Canadian Mgr. Jacques Berthelet, speaking to the Synod on Religious Life, noted that in 1962 there were 4,158 novices and students in Canadian religious institutes. This year there are 480. Not surprisingly he notes: *c'est en train de mourir*. Religious life, the organisations which embody it at present, are in the process of dying. Many of us might feel like men dwelling amidst the ruins of a vast and splendid building—a building that was once an object of breathtaking beauty, but is now a ruin—and we have nowhere else to go.

But not every province is undergoing this experience. The provinces of Africa and Asia are seeing extraordinary growth and new life, as are some of the provinces in the former area of Soviet influence. And many other provinces are hopeful, looking forward and able to plan creative

new projects. There is no uniform pattern in the fortunes of the provinces, then.

Learning to die

But to speak of the *ars moriendi*, as I have been asked to do, what can we learn from this about how we should deliberate for the next three weeks? Perhaps the first thing we should note is that the art of dying was not designed for organisational analysis. It is not in the first place a tool for corporate planning or legislation, which is what we are actually here to do. It is drawn from the vocabulary of Christian discipleship, of personal sanctification of the late medieval period, especially in the context of the decimation of Europe by the plagues of the time. When a third of the population of a country or region might die in a short time, the question of death takes on a new meaning. Its omnipresence, its power to destroy not only the individual but the whole community in which he finds himself, the community which he hopes will survive him, remember him and pray for him—all this makes for a new conception of death, a new meaning of death. It is perhaps in some ways parallel to the situation of the native American Sioux on the eve of their massacre at Wounded Knee: it has been commented that most of the people who were killed there were already living in the world of the dead. Most of the people they knew were dead. The people who were most real to them, the people in relation to whom they defined themselves, were the dead. That is a pretty radical shift—a reversal—in what we regard as a “normal” way of looking at things.

That kind of universalisation of death, the weight of the dead in the world of the living, is the context of the *ars moriendi* in the middle ages, shaping religious thought. Death was the *fact* which raised the ultimate questions about life, the dance which everyone would be called to join, and so it was a principle of human unity, the only thing that all men and women knew in common. The *ars moriendi* involved taking what was merely a fact, the fact of death, and making it into an art. What was suffered could instead be performed. What made the human being into a passive object of death’s grasp could be transformed so that the person became the active subject, creative, dying well, making what was called “a good death”. Death, which is feared and loathed, can be embraced in faith and become a human act, a work of art, a meaningful gesture of self-denial and self-offering. This is a deeply eucharistic insight. Jesus did not commit suicide or seek his own death, but knowing that his death was about to be encompassed by others, he transformed its meaning, transformed his death into something else. Thus, “on the night he was handed over” to his enemies, he himself handed over his body

and blood to his disciples. In this way fate, inescapable, isolating and dreadful, becomes an act of freedom, of love, of communion. What would simply have happened to him became something he did for others.

What does this have to do with Dominican life? What does it have to do with the way a group of Dominicans in chapter will reflect together on the needs and opportunities facing the Order in the last years of the twentieth century, a dying century?

Christian and Dominican discipleship

Perhaps the first thing we might suggest is that the art of dying applied to Dominican life is still to be seen primarily as a form of Christian discipleship. It is a path to be followed by all Christians. All Christians are invited to lay down their lives for their friends. All Christians are called to "hate their own lives", to take up their cross and follow Christ. But this general Christian dying-to-self in order to live for others might take a particular form among Christians who are also Dominicans.

Think of the forms of community life to which we are called as Dominicans, fraternal charity, as the Rule of Augustine bids us:

First that you dwell together in unity in the house and be of one mind and one heart in God, remembering that this is the end for which you are collected here.

And think of the ways in which this might suggest the practice of the *ars moriendi*, the death-to-self which is part of the vocation of love. It is not necessary to say to the brothers here in Caleruega, who must all know only too well, that much loss of self is inevitable in our community life, and that this is part of our way of salvation. The crosses we have to bear are often our own brothers, our own communities. But there are other aspects of mortality that we are perhaps inclined to forget. Are we inclined to forget our own mortality, the fact that our time is limited? How many times have we been at a funeral and heard someone say, "I wish I had told him how much I loved him. I wonder if he ever knew that I did." How many times have we said or thought that ourselves? How many times have we just put off the important word or gesture of love? We just drift on, forgetting that we are temporal, transient creatures, imagining that there will always be time, imagining that the present moment or opportunity is not somehow the most important one. The right time will come, later. But it won't. We are mortals, not gods. Isn't this the fundamental mistake of Adam and Eve: to want to be like gods, to escape the time-conditioned, provisional

existence with which God had made them, to escape the mortal finiteness which is the only life we have. This aspect of our mortality must teach us something about living together—about some things that might be not so important, and other things that might be absolutely important.¹

There is also the matter of our mobility, “itinerancy”. Every time a provincial assigns a man to a new community, something must die. As the French would have it: *partir c’est mourir un peu*. It is a way of dying that is built into our life at the deepest level—the permanent acceptance of loss.² In some ways a condition of permanent homelessness.

And then there is the whole question of what we build. We are sterile men. Remember the first commandment of God to humanity is “Be fruitful and multiply.”³ Reproduction is a universal human vocation. And is that not how most men and women defy death, in the hope that their children outlive them and become blessings to them when they are dead. But when we are dead, even if a few people will perhaps remember us, they won’t last long, and we will leave no children, no biological heirs. We will not leave that kind of mark. Oblivion! We have chosen not to seek a future in the potency of our loins. But as a result of this, perhaps we are tempted to defy the oblivion of death in other ways. By creating some great project, for example, that will outlive us. By defending what we have built and preserving it against others, or by knocking down things that other people have built to make way for our own plans, our own projects. Desperately seeking to make something that will last, that will outlast our short span of life.

This can result in tensions between the brethren, different visions they have of the works of their province. We are all familiar with the situation in which brothers who are established in some place, having built up their empires and their projects, are threatened by change. There are men in my own province who fought hard in the nineteen sixties to break out of the mould of a pseudo-monastic discipline (what I have heard referred to as “midnight fish”). They won their battle, and English Dominicans have lived a different life for the last thirty years. But there are men in the province now who see new novices arriving every year, often young men who knew nothing of that old pattern of religious life of the 1950’s, who seem to want to return to those ways. We have men who can hardly bear to wear the religious habit, and we have young men in their twenties coming into the Order who can hardly bear to take it off, inside or outside, at home or on the street.

These older men have fought their battles, and they have left us a province in which there are freedoms they never had. But now they

must practise the art of dying in a thousand details of community life, in liturgy, in study, in social involvement, while what they have worked and suffered to create is not just treated with ingratitude, but is dismantled by the young. Parishes which have been built up over a hundred and fifty years, projects which have been the altars on which generations of Dominicans have made an offering of their lives, will be abandoned as we move into new work. This is happening not only in the province of England but across the world, and is becoming a matter of policy—as we find in the pre-chapter report on the Common Life.⁴ The older brethren are asked to die to make way for the younger ones.

But more than this. If these young men are coming to the Order to follow Christ, they themselves must also be given guidance in the art of dying. They have entrusted themselves to the Order, and part of the responsibility which we accept when we receive their profession is the responsibility of teaching them the art. There is no hope for a young Dominican who cannot realise during his formation something of how he must lose himself, die to himself. This is not an excuse for the older men to cling defensively to their own position or to resist change. They need instead to lead the young on that sacrificial path, and that means to travel it with them, to give an example of generosity. But nevertheless, the young must also be confronted with the Cross, with their mortality, and with the way of dying to self which conditions Dominican life.

It is clear that in different cultural milieux the *ars moriendi* will have to take different forms. The report of Emmanuel Ntakarutimana, the Socius of the Master for Africa, raises the culturally specific question of kinship. It is a problem for Dominican identity in parts of the world where people are defined by their blood-connections. Our religious profession must enable us to “live beyond blood connections” and the loyalties they imply.⁵ But this means that young men, whose identity and life has been formed in a certain framework must learn to go beyond it, to be plucked out of the soil which has given them life and entrust themselves to a new society, or a new tribe, as Emmanuel puts it. They will be asked to die, to lose the life they have received from their kin, and to wait to receive new life from the Order. It is a risk for them. It is a risk in any society, to leave one’s defining life-giving nexus to enter a new religious community. At least it ought to be a risk.

Another aspect of the *ars moriendi* is cultivated in study, which is after all a central part of our lives. I am told that there is a strange remark by St Thomas somewhere when he comments on the Beatitude: *Blessed are those who mourn*. He says that this beatitude is particularly fitting for students, people engaged in the search for truth—that is to say, for all Dominicans. Do we recognise this sense of study as a *via*

crucis? Do we inculcate a sense that the pursuit of truth is a costly thing for the student? Do we have the sense that learning and study will bring great discoveries, but also great losses—not only the loss of time, the hardness of the toil at difficult work, which may be considerable, but also the loss of old certainties, the sense of losing your self as your old secure patterns of thought are disrupted, as you are disorientated. There is a passage in a letter by Franz Kafka which alludes to such an experience:

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us ... we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.⁶

This ought to be written in letters a meter high on the wall of every library in the Order where the brethren study, where they handle the books that will be part of their way of the cross, where they will break their hearts.

Dying fruitfully as Dominicans

Now these experiences of death and dying are all intensely personal—experiences of loss of self, of the loss of our way of asserting ourselves and projecting ourselves into the future by defending our own creative work. We must all go through it, one way or another, over and over again. It is a personal task, if you like, of self-gift, self-offering, which each brother must find his own way of fulfilling. It is his own personal vocation. At the centre of it there is something of the invitation to freedom and generosity, to fraternal love and courage, which is made to each and every brother. And when we say that each brother is responsible for his own formation, this is what we mean, surely: that each brother must find his own way of responding to that invitation, of becoming an artist of the *ars moriendi*.

But it is also something that we should bear in mind in a General Chapter. Part of our responsibility is surely to create the kind of legislative framework which will support the brethren in the *ars moriendi*, ways of encouragement which will enable them to do it, and policies which will help such sacrifices to give life to our communities, and to bear fruit in the church. How can we help each grain fall to the earth and die most fruitfully?

But we must also ask ourselves whether this metaphor of death and dying, applied in the first case to the personal discipleship of each Dominican brother, doesn't also have a corporate dimension. I don't just

mean the idea that the *Acta* of a General Chapter concern the whole body of the Order and so will have some effects in the *ars moriendi* practised by every brother. I mean in addition that there are corporate events which can also be usefully described by this same metaphor. For example, the personal *ars moriendi* involves the question of wealth: detachment from possessions, choosing a simplicity of life-style, almsgiving, and matters of economic justice. By extension we might want to ask what the practice of the *ars moriendi* might involve for the Order as a whole. Looking around at the economic circumstances of the Order in the world, the disparity between the wealthier provinces and the poorer ones, is there an *ars moriendi* to be studied here? We have read in the pre-chapter papers how the poorer provinces have numerous vocations and insufficient money, while the richer ones seem to have rather the reverse problem.⁷ Or the fact that this Order—a mendicant order—is a good deal wealthier in many places than the people to whom it ministers. In this context, religious poverty is seen “either as a luxury or a joke.”⁸ Or the fact that much of the desperate poverty of most of the world’s poor, the countless people who go to bed hungry every night, the men and women who watch their children die, and the people whose lives are crushed and their freedoms taken away, are suffering these things as a direct or indirect result of particular economic mechanisms—and these mechanisms are not entirely unconnected to the way some of our provinces obtain their income. Is there an *ars moriendi* to be studied here?

Then there is the question of government and organisation in the Order. There are vicariates who may seek to become provinces, to establish their independence and to pursue their own road. The loss of such a vicariate may not be easy for the province.

And there is some sign that whole provinces may have to lose their distinctive identity—a move which has already taken place in northern Italy, where two provinces have agreed to join together, and will have a joint chapter as one province next year. Other provinces are still discussing this possibility. Again, though these moves seem to be full of hope and forward-looking creative energy, there is still an element of death and loss involved here.

The question of inculturation is also one which might be usefully examined under the metaphor of the *ars moriendi*. We have often spoken of our missionary vocation in previous chapters and in our reflections on the historical process of new encounters of the Gospel with world culture. Inculturation may require the *ars moriendi*—for an institution or a community to sacrifice elements of its own life, of its world-view, to remain faithful in a new context. Here, however, I would

want to sound a warning. It seems to me that there is an important difference in principle between inculturation of the Gospel in any society and compromising the Gospel. Inculturation will enable the Gospel to be preached effectively in the heart of the world, so that people will know the love of God through the ministry of preachers. But compromise will simply give a pseudo-religious veneer to the existent culture, without uttering the challenge of the gospel. In such cases of over-inculturation, the Gospel's voice is lost. I also suspect that such over-inculturation may be partly to blame for the failure of the Order to thrive in some provinces, though it was done for the best possible evangelical motives. Young men looking for a way of making a radical commitment to the preaching of the Gospel are not necessarily looking for something which bears too close a resemblance to the alternatives available to them. They are actually looking for something different, hungering for a different kind of wisdom—a counter-cultural vision and praxis.

In some cases the difference between proper inculturation and excessive inculturation is clear: to accept elements of a culture which degrade women, for example, will be an excessive form of inculturation. This might be a problem in the emerging work of the Order in China, or in other countries where female infanticide is an established practice. But not all elements of a culture will be quite as clear cut as this, and there will be much discussion and argument in any given situation to work out just what is acceptable and what is not. What about the over-enthusiastic acceptance of certain forms of western liberal individualism in other provinces, or the cultural priority given to kinship-ties, or misogyny, or materialism? What if Bartolomé de Las Casas had been more sensitive to the culture of slavery and genocide? The history of the church and of the Order can be read as the history of the struggle between proper inculturation which is a generous and liberating response to the suffering of men and women, and the over-inculturation which brings sterility and despair. These are structural problems which will require structural resolutions, as well as personal sacrifice.

They are structural problems, among many others, that we have to deal with as diffinitors. The *ars moriendi* for legislators and planners. In fact, from the distance of Caleruega, this might look to some of our brethren more like the *ars interficiendi*, the art of slaying, or the *ars carnificiendi*, as we hack and slash our way through people's lives, through our institutions, trying to discern the points of hope, the points of potential rebirth and renewal which can sometimes only come at points of death; trying to figure out what must die. In his paper, Emmanuel will shortly focus our minds on these areas of hope and

rebirth, but we still need to bear this in mind: that we are helping our brothers to die. There is no instant managerial solution that we can produce to any serious question or challenge. We have come to this place to engage in an orgy of photocopying and discussion and writing and rewriting. But we must beware of the managerial fantasy of power, the seductive power of the word-processor. Management is not the answer if it is seen as an alternative to sacrifice. We are helping our brothers to die, to lay down their lives—one would hope creatively and fruitfully, but that is not guaranteed. We are not promised success. We are not even asked to be successful, as managers are. We are asked simply to be charitable and to remain faithful. The outcome of that is not in our hands.

- 1 Fergus Kerr OP, 25–6–95.
- 2 Remember that moving house is high on the list of psycho-pathogenic factors, along with bereavement and divorce.
- 3 Genesis 1:28.
- 4 R–18, p. 4. “It is particularly important (except where the Order is at the stage of *implantatio Ordinis*) to create the conditions for renouncing parishes and once the conditions are present to act on them.”
- 5 R–7, p. 3.
- 6 Letter to Oskar Pollak, 27 January 1904.

Reviews

CELTIC CHRISTIANITY AND NATURE: EARLY IRISH AND HEBRIDEAN TRADITIONS by Mary Low, *Edinburgh University Press*, 1996. Pp. xii + 232, £12.95.

CELTIC JOURNEYS IN SCOTLAND AND THE NORTH OF ENGLAND by Shirley Toulson, *Fount (Harper Collins)*, 1995. Pp. 149, £7.99.

Celtic Christianity, like all things Celtic these days, is a boom industry for publishers. The two books under review here represent opposite poles of this market. The reprint of Shirley Toulson's *Celtic Journeys* is an example of the worst of Celtic Christianity writing. Poorly researched and sloppily written, the only real value in this book are the tours which the author suggests around sites connected with various Scottish and Northern English saints. (Though even here the directions can be confusing, e.g., “To the north of Meigle is the model village of