

Do Not Be Afraid: The Carmelite Saints on the Fear of Death

By ANGELICA AVCIKURT, TOC

“Do ... I have ... the scapular ... on?” asked **Saint Maria Maravillas de Jesus**, a Discalced Carmelite, on her death bed. They gave it to her to kiss. When asked if she was happy, she smiled as if saying, “Imagine.” When one of the sisters reassured her: “Our Most Holy Mother is coming to fetch you with her white cape and scapular,” she replied, “I am not worthy ... for her ... immense ... charity.”

I heard a priest during a sermon say that when asked, most people say they want to go to heaven, but just not today. Heaven can wait, as they say. In contrast, **Catherine of Jesus**, a Spanish Carmelite nun and mystic, when asked by Jesus if she wanted to go with Him, answered: “Yes, Lord.” And when Jesus asked her in turn when she wanted to go, she replied, “Immediately, Lord, immediately.” Fear of death may seem natural, since we generally fear the unknown and we fear suffering. However, the prevalent attitude among the saints is quite different and we can learn much from them. Instead of fearing death, they go as far as longing for it. They set their gaze past the suffering of the last agony and focus on the embrace of their beloved and the entrance into eternal life.

Saint Teresa of the Andes rejoiced that each birthday brought her closer to death. At a tender age, she wrote in her Diary, “Today is July 13th and I am sixteen years old, one year less of this life, one year close to death, and one year closer to eternal union with God.” And whoever thought of a terminal illness as having a lottery ticket and the awaited prize being death? **Saint Thérèse of Lisieux** did. When she found out that she had tuberculosis but that there was a chance that she would recover, she commented, “I’m like a person who, having a lottery ticket, runs the chance of winning, more so than one who hasn’t a ticket; but still the person is not sure of obtaining a prize. So I have a ticket, my illness, and I can keep up my hopes!”

When saints longed for death, they were not trying to escape the harsh realities in which many of them lived, or the sufferings they endured. When saints longed for death, it was really God and heaven they were longing for. It is the knowledge that in heaven, their salvation is no longer at risk and they will no longer be able to offend God there.

The saints long for heaven because they realize that it is their true home, and that there is no lasting happiness in this world. Everything here is transitory. Thus, the first step in our preparing for death, as Father David Greenstock puts it, must be a “reorientation of our ideas, a slow process of forcing ourselves to realize that here we have no abiding city. God has made us for Himself and no created thing can really supply the demands of the human heart. God made us for an eternal destiny, and if we fail to achieve that, then all our success and happiness on this earth will count for nothing and our lives will be truly lost.”

As Carmelites we know that suffering has an incredible redemptive value when offered in union with the sufferings of Christ. Through our final suffering, we may atone for our sins and gain merit that will last for all eternity. That is to say that our suffering—be it mental, emotional or physical—will come to an end when we die; but if during our time of suffering we bear it patiently and offer it to God we can not only atone for our sins but gain merit that will beautify our souls for all eternity.

Saint Teresa of Avila gives the following advice to the sisters of her order: “If we do not determine once and for all to swallow death and the lack of health, we will never do anything. Strive not to fear them; abandon yourselves totally to God, come what may. So what if we die? If our bodies have mocked us so often, shouldn’t we mock it at least once?”

We can also learn from **Saint Thérèse of Lisieux**. During her last months, her sister, Mother Agnes of Jesus, several times brought up the subject of her physical suffering while dying. One day she told Thérèse: “I fear you will have to suffer very much to die.” To

which Thérèse replied: “Why fear in advance? Wait at least for it to happen before having any distress. Don’t you see that I would begin to torment myself by thinking that, if persecutions and massacres come, as they are predicted, someone will perhaps snatch out your eyes.” We gain nothing by anticipating suffering. Instead, if we spend that time trying to grow in the love of God and in holiness, maybe if we are called to suffer, we will do it well.

Saint Teresa of the Andes reminds us that, “Death is not frightening for a Carmelite. She is going to begin living her true life. She will fall into the arms of the One she loved here on earth above all things. She is going to be eternally submerged in love.”

The Lord said the following about fearing death to **Gabrielle Bossis**, a French laywoman and mystic: “Don’t be afraid of anything. Death? Of course not. You will receive the grace to clothe yourself in death. You will enter into a task received by me, I helping you as always. You know what actual grace is—what you call ‘grace for the moment?’ I am grace. When you are with me, are you afraid? Didn’t I always say to my apostles after the resurrection, ‘Don’t be afraid!’ My little girl, if you were afraid I would be hurt.”

Saint Pio of Pietralcina was told by one of his spiritual daughters, Cleonice Morcaldi, that she feared death very much. Padre Pio, referring to God’s divine providence, replied to her: “Trust and abandon yourself. Love excludes fear.”

And if you are still afraid of dying, call on the Carmelite saints to come assist you at the hour of death. In an interesting little book entitled *Deathbed Invitations: Short Prayers to a Saint of the Day for a Happy*

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A Celebration of St. Teresa of Avila:

St. Teresa's Gift to the 21st Century



THE 2015 CARMELITE SYMPOSIUM

A Celebration of Saint Teresa of Avila: Saint Teresa's Gift to the 21st Century

June 28 - July 2, 2015

By JOAN KNETEMANN, DIRECTOR OF THE CARMELITE INSTITUTE, WASHINGTON, DC

How many celebrations of Saint Teresa of Jesus will there be in 2015? How do you pick and choose the events that will both inform and inspire you? Why not consider attending the 2015 Carmelite Symposium held on the beautiful campus of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake at Mundelein, Illinois. Why *this* symposium?


- The **Speakers**: Not only will we have regulars from the Carmelite Forum present, but we will welcome new young scholars who find inspiration in Saint Teresa of Jesus. For a full list of speakers, please visit our website: www.CarmelStream.org.

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- Enjoy the new musical commissioned by the Boston Carmel: ***The Interior Castle***. Professional musicians and actors will present this new artistic work about Saint Teresa's influence on a young 21st Century journalist.

- The **Setting**: Mundelein is beautiful in late June, so this symposium will not only inform your mind, but will inspire your spirit with its peaceful beauty and it is only 40 minutes from Chicago airports!


Need more convincing? Go to the Carmelite Institute of North America's website: www.CarmelStream.org to view an on-line brochure and to register. Do you have questions, or would like to request a bulk shipment of brochures for your Carmelite Community? Email the Executive Director at Director@CarmelStream.org.

See you this summer! 

Do Not Be Afraid

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Death, the author, Placidus Kempf, a Benedictine monk, gives us the following suggestion in the foreword: "Each day Holy Mother Church celebrates the day of death—their birthday to eternal life—of a number of her saintly children. YOUR day of death will occur on one of the days of the year. That day may be today. Invite, therefore, a saint of today to be present at your deathbed and to escort you to heaven."

Remember, our Blessed Mother has clothed us with her Scapular and we belong to a holy family, the Carmelite family. Jesus Christ has already defeated death and has opened for us the gates of heaven where the Carmelite saints are waiting to welcome us. 

PRAYER TO SAINT THÉRÈSE TO OBTAIN A HAPPY DEATH

I ardently beseech thee, dear Saint Thérèse, to obtain from Almighty God this grace, that with Mary and Joseph at my side I may die a peaceful and holy death strengthened by the Sacraments of the Church and entirely resigned to God's will. May my last words on earth be the dying prayer thou didst utter: "My God...I love Thee!"



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