

Bishop Fulton J Sheen

FROM THE WRITINGS OF BISHOP J SHEEN: PEACE OF SOUL-1949

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

An overemphasis on temporal security is a compensation for loss of the sense of eternal security. When the soul becomes poor through the loss of its wealth, which is virtue, its owner seeks luxury and riches to atone for his inner nakedness. The richer the soul, the less store it sets on the material. It is not poverty that makes men quarrelsome and unhappy, as the Communists claim; it is an over fondness for the things that money buys. Poor monks are usually friendlier and far happier than millionaires. And it is also an error to say that, if economic conditions were good, there would be no proponents of Communism. Those who make this statement forget that: (1) Poor economic conditions are only an occasion for embracing Communism, not a cause; in some instances, economic trials are, instead, an occasion for renewed spiritual living. (2) Economic conditions were excellent in the Garden of Eden, but the first "Red" got in and made a shambles of it. (3) What makes an unstable society is not the fact that people do not have enough but that they always want more. There is no limit to man's demands, once the earth is made the be all and end all of living; soon they are willing to use every means available to possess as much of it as they can win. The real cause of such unbounded lust for what is often called "security" is fear of the eternal void within. Never before in history was the Gospel warning about God and Mammon as clearly fulfilled as today for the soul that has lost its God must worship Mammon.

From this clutching at goods results a fear of death, a dread that we may lose whatever we have accumulated, that our temporal security will vanish into eternal insecurity. *This fear of death, suffered by the modern pagan, differs from the fear of death of the faithful in several ways.* The pagan fears the loss of his body and his wealth; the faithful fears the loss of his soul. The believer fears God with a filial fear such as a devoted son has toward a loving father; the pagan fears, not God, but his fellow man, who seems to threaten him. Hence the increase in cynicism, suspicion, irreverence, strifes, and war; the neighbor must be killed, by word if not by sword, because he is an enemy to be dreaded. The modern pagan, in refusing to continue life by the procreation of birth, becomes the sower of death. Denying the immortality of his own soul, he refuses immortality to the race by stifling his reproductive function, and thus he doubly courts the fear of death. Freud has said that Love and Death are related which indeed they are, but not in the way Freud imagined. Love, understood as sex alone, does bring death when it sacrifices the race for the pleasure of the person. Love, understood not as glandular but as intellectual and volitional, also involves death, for it seeks to die that the beloved may live; this love, however, conquers death, through a resurrection. But to an unbeliever death, instead of being an empirical fact, has become a metaphysical anxiety. As Franz Werfel profoundly remarked on the subject: "The skeptic believes in nothing more than death; the believer believes in nothing less. Since the world to him is a creation of spirit and love, he cannot be threatened by eternal destruction in his essential being as a creature of the world."

The world fears the very things Our Lord told us not to fear. He said we were not to fear

dying, nor to fear being “called on the carpet” for our faith, nor to fear economic insecurity, nor to fear the future.

“Therefore I say to you, be not solicitous for your life, what you shall eat, nor for your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than the meat: and the body more than the raiment? Behold the birds of the air, for they neither sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns: and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not you of much more value than they? And which of you by taking thought, can add to his stature one cubit? And for raiment why are you solicitous? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they labour not, neither do they spin. But I say to you, that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed as one of these. And if the grass of the field, which is to day, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, God doth so clothe: how much more you, Oh ye of little faith: Be not solicitous therefore, saying, What shall we eat: or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the heathens seek. For your Father knoweth that you have need of all these things. Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God, and his justice, and all these things shall be added unto you. Be not therefore solicitous for tomorrow; for the morrow will be solicitous for itself. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof (Matt. 6:25-34”).

But Our Lord told us what we are to fear the consequences of judgment if we did not live right, blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, miserliness, and the denial of our faith. The modern man has completely reversed this order of things to be feared. He takes lightly those things which the Saviour warned us to fear; but he trembles at those things which the Saviour bade us not to fear. Sometimes his unhealthy fear is hidden under a cover of silence: this is particularly true of the fact of death. The modern man seeks to forget about death altogether or if he cannot do that to conceal it, to render it unobtrusive, to disguise it. He feels awkward in the presence of death, does not know how to console or what to say. Everything in his attitude contradicts the Christian injunction, “Remember thy last end.” For he regards all discussion of death as morbid; yet he will laugh at a comedy in which a dozen people are killed and will stay awake half the night reading a detective story about a murder. This, too, is death, and it entralls him; but he concentrates upon the circumstances by which death comes, rather than upon the eternal issues of death, which alone are all important. This modern insensitiveness to death is insensitiveness to personality, to the moral order, and to destiny.

Many factors today build an unnatural attitude to death. Vain indeed are the pagan’s attempts to turn death into comedy or to obscure its meaning by laughter, for when death is a personal threat, modern man is afraid to look upon its face. Physicians no longer warn their patients of the imminence of death; they act as if there were no preparation needed for eternity. Even the family of the imperiled man plays a part in the great game of self deception. Today’s morticians make death look like life; they pretend that all that it involves is a little sleep, after which everyone will wake up on an eternal shore which has no passport regulations. The cult of staying young contributes to the macabre pretense that death will never come; first it denies the seven ages of man of which Shakespeare spoke, then it turns men’s minds away from the fact of judgment which confronts them at the moment of death. Modern totalitarianism, with its herd mentality, absorbs persons into a collectivity and leads them to believe that they live in the mass, that they are important only as builders of a better future for the race; personal immortality becomes group immortality which is no

immortality, for even the group, too, will perish in time. Moreover, the moral mediocrity of any earthly Utopia ever planned is shocking to the individual's highest moral ideals; reasonable men cannot die cheerfully in the belief that such a banality will come about some day. Furthermore, every man must die before the Utopia he envisions is attained, and the only consolation this philosophy offers him is that his great grandchildren will dance on his grave. All totalitarian schemes, however, hold out this hope; they place the Garden of Eden in the future. Their very denial of tradition, their passion to scrap everything that belongs to the memory of the human race is another attempt to escape from the reality of death.

Those who try to ignore death sometimes say that it is a fear of dying that makes men religious. Certainly this fear has something to do with faith. It is one of the factors of religion because it brings man face to face with the mystery at the heart of life. Why? Whither? Wherefore? Ignore it, deny it, laugh at it, but each life runs up a bill which some day must be met, and with strict Justice. As the merchant in the evening pulls out from his cash register the slip on which is written the debits and credits of the day, so, too, an hour will come when life's business is done, when the Great Judge will pull out conscience, the record of our rights and wrongs: "It is appointed unto all men once to die, and after that the judgment." It was the Devil who said, "You will not die." To rouse men out of the spirit of that lie, Christianity has enjoined them to ask themselves, "For what are you living today? It is for that that you will die tomorrow." It tells them, "Where the tree falleth, there it lies," and 'Watch and Pray, for you know not the hour nor the day.'

It is no answer to the fact of death to say that life is like a match which has been struck, which will burn for a moment and then cease to exist. If our life were like a match, death would have no terrors for us, as it has none for animals. But even the analogy of the match does not provide a case for man's mortality; for although the match is blown out, its light still travels through space at the rate of 186,000 miles a second and survives somewhere in the universe. Nor can we show the transience of man's life by saying that we are like the fruit on a tree, that clings and ripens and then falls and dies: for while the fruit clings to the skin, and the skin to the pulp, and the pulp to the seed, it nevertheless remains true that, although the ripe fruit falls and the birds peck at it for a time, there is still at the heart of it a seed that will live for another generation and provide its immortality.

Yet death is a fact. Animals die, and so do men, but the difference is that men know they must die. By that very fact, we men surmount death, we get above it, we transcend it, look at it, survey it, and thus stand outside it. This very act is a dim foreshadowing of immortality. Our mortality is frightening to us largely because we can contemplate immortality, and we have a dim suspicion that we have lost the immortality that once belonged to us. We ought to have it; yet we have it not. Something, has interfered. We are not all we ought to be. If death were merely a physical must, we would not fear it; our fear comes from the moral fact that we know we ought not to die. We fear death because it was not part of the original plan laid down for us. And we also fear it because we have made so poor a use of our years of life. When the sense of sin is keen, this fear of facing our own failures may become paradoxically acute, so that the individual wants to lose himself in order not to have to live with himself. This is suicide and nihilism.

Death is a source of meditation on many of the great truths. It is a sign of evil in the world, for, to the Christian, death belongs not only to the biological order but also to the moral and spiritual realms. The first record that we have of death in the Scriptures associates it with sin and a rebellion against Love. Death makes its first appearance in this world as punishment. And death is, from the first, twofold; for a distinction must be made between the death of the body and the death of the soul. As St. John tells us in the Apocalypse, "You call yourselves living, and yet you are dead." Just as the life of the body is the soul, so the life of the soul is the grace of God; when the soul leaves the body, the body is dead, and when grace leaves a soul, that soul is dead. It was in virtue of this distinction that Our Blessed Saviour told us not to fear those who kill the body but rather to fear those who would kill the soul. The correlation between death and sin is made very clear in St. Paul's words, "The wages of sin is death." Every city is full of dead souls in live bodies as well as live bodies and live souls; the double death is a death of both body and soul.

Although Christianity sees in death a tragedy and a penalty, it nevertheless gives humanity its victory over it. The Lord of Life Himself descended to taste that death and to conquer it by resurrection from the dead. He thereby overcame death at its most devilish and destructive. The worst thing that evil can do is, not to bomb children, but to kill Divine Life; having done that, and been defeated in the moment of its greatest show of strength, it never could be victorious again.

Death has other meanings. It offers an affirmation of the purpose of life in an otherwise meaningless existence, for the world could endlessly carry on its Godless plan if there was no death. What death is to an individual, catastrophe is to a civilization; the end of its wickedness. Death is a negative testimony to God's power in a meaningless world; by it God brings the meaningless to naught. Once evil has come into the world, death is seen as a kind of blessing, for if there was no death, evil could go on forever. That is why God stationed an angel with a flaming sword at the Gate of Paradise, lest fallen man, eating of the tree of immortality, should immortalize his evil. But, because of death, evil cannot carry on its wickedness indefinitely. If there were no catastrophe such as the Apocalypse reveals at the end of the world, the universe would mark the triumph of meaninglessness; but the catastrophe is a reminder that God will not allow unrighteousness to become eternal. There is a day of judgment; and judgment means that evil is self-defeating.

The meaning of life can become apparent only in judgment and valuation. Personal judgment at the moment of death is a revelation of the meaning of personal life, and the cosmic judgment at the end of time is a revelation of the meaning of social values. All the catastrophes, wars, revolutions and toppling civilizations, are reminders that our ideas have been found wanting, our bad dreams have been realized. If these thoughts of ours had been true and sound, they would not need to be destroyed, for truth is eternal; death comes only to life which has not fulfilled its inner meaning.

The revelation of the coming of the anti-Christ means that men have refused to accept eternal values, for death is not the triumph of death, but the triumph of meaning. Jerusalem has passed away because it did not know the time of its visitation. That same

statement holds true for every other civilization. And so, by making an end to evil, God affirms the power of love over the power of chaos. This is the significance of His answer to Pilate, who said, "Know you not that I have the power to condemn you?" but Our Lord answered, "You would not have the power unless it were given to you from above." There is only one passage in Sacred Scripture where God is said to laugh; that is in the psalm, "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh and hold them in derision." The theology of this laughter is this: incongruity inspires laughter. A street cleaner in a silk hat is a laughable and incongruous sight; God's laughter is likewise provoked by the incongruity of an earthly dictator thinking that he has become a god or that his evil is eternal. Death is God's necessary gift to a universe in which evil has been let loose. But if death were irremediable, the universe could not be justified. It would be a closed system.

The Resurrection is also necessary; it not only gives victory over death, but it wipes away evil or corruption. *Mortem moriendo destruxit*. Since the Resurrection and Pentecost, man can restore himself to Divine Love through the application of Christ's Redemption through the Sacraments; he does not recover immortality of body until the final resurrection. Nonetheless, all men share a profound intuition that their deaths can serve a triumphant purpose. Why is a man less willing to die in a train wreck or an automobile accident than he is to be killed on a battlefield or as a martyr to his faith? Is it not because death is less terrifying and more meaningful as soon as we rise above the level of the commonplace and lift ourselves into the realm of eternal values where, alone, death has meaning?

Death is the end of evil; we see this revealed in the faces of the dead, which are often more harmonious than they were in life, as the sleeping face is more restful than the waking. Ugly feelings and hates, eccentricities and discords disappear in the presence of the dead, so that we even say, "Of the dead say nothing but good." In the presence of the dead, we give praise and adulation; we resurrect the good things and the charities, kindnesses, and humor of our friend. The best qualities are what are recalled posthumously, making us wonder whether death itself may not be a thrusting to the fore of the good which we have done, a disprizing of the evil. Not that both of them will not be recalled, they will. But as life revealed the debit side of our character, so death, too, will show forth the credit side. Death is thus bound up with goodness.

And death is also bound up with love, or, rather, love is always bound up with death. He who accepts love, accepts sacrifice. We give the ring of gold, instead of the ring of tin, as a symbol of sacrifice, and sacrifice is a lesser form of death. Surpassing all minor sacrifices is the complete love which is willing to accept death for the beloved, as a soldier dies for his country. Whoever attaches too much value to life and runs away from death also runs away from perfect love: "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friend." The acceptance of death is thus a manifestation of our love of God.

Death will individualize and personalize all of us. Because it separates the soul from the body, it finds out each and every one in its search; it will reveal the real me as against the surface me. The soul will stand naked before God, seen at last as it truly is. And if a soul is not then clothed with virtue, it will feel ashamed, as Adam and Eve were, when they had sinned and hid from God; for it was only after their sin that they felt naked and ashamed. This relationship between nakedness of the soul and sin is always a close one at the judgment of our souls, in Eden, and in this life, where, the less grace men and

women have in their souls, the more gaudily they dress, in a kind of compensation, as we noted earlier.

The separation of the soul from the body after death will bring another change; it will do away with the special advantages which some of us enjoyed in this life, for the body in relationship to the soul might be likened to a person driving an automobile. One man drives through life in a broken down jalopy, another in a 700 horsepower motor, another in a 50 horsepower motor, and still another in a 200 horsepower motor, but when there is a traffic violation of the law, no one is judged by the kind of car he is driving but by whether or not he broke the law. In the same manner, at the moment of death, when the soul leaves the body, we shall be judged not by the earthly advantages that we had beauty or talent, or the wealth that accompanied the body, or the social advantages but only by the degree to which we responded to Divine Love. As Dives was separated from his five brothers by death, so each of us will be separated from the group and from the crowd. Then each and every one must step forward, alone, out of the ranks. There will be no attorneys there to plead our case, no alienists to argue that we were not in our right minds when we did wrong. There will be only one voice: it will be the voice of conscience which will reveal us as we really are. Lord, I lie open to thy scrutiny; thou knowest me, knowest when I sit down and when I rise up again, canst read my thoughts from far away. Wake I or sleep I, thou canst tell; no movement of mine but thou art watching it. Before ever the words are framed on my lips, all my thought is known to thee; rearguard and vanguard, thou dost compass me about, thy hand still laid upon me. Such wisdom as this is far beyond my reach, no thought of mine can attain it. Where can I go, then, to take refuge from thy spirit, to hide from thy view? If I should climb up to heaven, thou art there; if I sink down to the world beneath, thou art present still. If I could wing my way eastwards, or find a dwelling beyond the western sea, still would I find thee beckoning to me, thy right hand upholding me. Or perhaps I would think to bury myself in darkness; night should surround me, friendlier than day; but no, darkness is no hiding place from thee, with thee the night shines clear as day itself; light and dark are one.

Thine are my inmost thoughts. Didst thou not form me in my mother's womb? I praise thee for my wondrous fashioning, for all the wonders of thy creation. Of my soul thou hast full knowledge, and this mortal frame has no mysteries for thee, who didst contrive it in secret, devise its pattern, there in the dark recesses of the earth. All my acts thy eyes have seen, all are set down already in thy record; my days were numbered before ever they came to be. A riddle, O my God, thy dealings with me, so vast their scope. (Ps. 138, lines 1-17).

Death will thus manifest that uniqueness of each personality which, as the Scholastics said, is incommunicable. Pascal wrote, "Nothing is so important to man as his own state, nothing so formidable to him as eternity." Death confronts self with self in its great moment of mental awakening in the morning of the afterlife. In that tearing away of all illusionment, the soul will see itself as it really is. It still drags a train of experiences behind it; it has the memory, that storehouse of habits good and bad, of prayers said, of kindnesses to the poor, as well as the refusal of grace, the sins of avarice, of lust, and of pride.

Since we are faced with this inevitable event, how shall we meet it? The pagan and the Christian have different ways of answering. The pagan as he lives moves progressively closer to death; the Christian moves backward from it. The pagan tries to ignore death, but each tick of the clock brings him nearer to it through fear and anxiety. The Christian begins his life by contemplating his death; knowing that he will die, he plans his life accordingly, in order to enjoy eternal life. There are two stages in the pagan's experience, human life and human death. In the Christian's, there are three, human life, human death, which is a gate to the third stage Divine life. Christianity has always recommended the contemplation of death as an encouragement to a good life; and this is actually effective, for although we cannot go backward in time, we can go forward in time. A man can therefore say to himself, "What I am living for today, that I shall die for tomorrow."

The Christian principle for conquering death is twofold: (1) Think about death. (2) Rehearse for it by mortification now. The purpose of contemplation is to conquer the dread and compulsion of death by voluntarily facing it. Through anticipating the final end, we may contemplate new beginnings. Our Blessed Lord lived from the end of life backward: "I came to give My life for the redemption of the world." The Lamb is pictured as "slain from the beginning of the world."

The perspective on death robs us of our shoddy views of living. If we think about death, we shake ourselves out of our fantasy that the universe is not a moral one.

In treating schizophrenia, a violent electric shock is sometimes applied to the head of the patient; the schizophrenic is so alarmed, so threatened, that in order to escape what seems like dissolution the mind puts off its fantasy and the patient is thrust back into the real world. Meditation on death has something of that effect on the spiritual system. It breaks the spell which made us think that pleasure is everything, that we ought to go on making more money or building more buildings, that religion is for the feebleminded, and other such illusions.

When we contemplate the death of self, the citadel of self is bound to be attacked. We glimpse our own inner being and its poverty. Each of us comes into life with fists closed, set for aggressiveness and acquisition; but when we abandon life, our hands are open; there is nothing on earth that we need, nothing the soul can take with it that could not be taken away after any shipwreck its own works. *Opera enim illorum sequuntur illos.* Because meditation on our final end takes the mind off the present self, it destroys excessive egocentricity and lessens our fears and anxieties. For fears diminish as we cease to think of ourselves in our immediate aspect and adjust our minds, instead, to the larger landscape of eternity.

Death can be robbed of its greatest fearfulness if we practice for it. Christianity recommends mortification, penance, and detachment as a rehearsal for the great event. For every death should be a great masterpiece, and, like all masterpieces, it cannot be completed in a day. A sculptor who wishes to carve a figure out of a block uses his chisel, first cutting away great chunks of marble, then smaller pieces, until he finally reaches a point where only a brush of hand is needed to reveal the figure. In the same way, the soul has to undergo tremendous mortifications at first, and then more refined detachments, until finally its Divine image is revealed. Because mortification is recognized as a

practice of death, there is fitting epitaph inscribed on the tomb of Don Scotus, Bis Mortmis; Semel Sepultus (twice died, but buried only once). When we die to something, something, comes alive within us. If we die to self, charity comes alive; if we die to pride, service comes alive; if we die to lust, reverence for personality comes alive; if we die to anger, love comes alive.

The basic spiritual principle is this, that death must be conquered in every thought and word and deed by an affirmation of the eternal. Spiritual writers advise us that everything should be done as if one were going to die in the next moment. If we treat the living as though they were dying, too, then the good in them will come to the surface. Treat the dead as still alive, and our prayers will follow them; thus a belief in the state of purgation after death allows us to atone for our want of love while our friends were still on earth. The failure to help their bodies then can be balanced now by our spiritual assistance to their souls through prayer.

Death is meant to be our true birth, our beginning. Christianity, in contrast to paganism, always blesses her children's spiritual birth into eternity; in the liturgy, the day on which a saint dies is called his natilitia, or birthday. The world celebrates a birthday on the day a person is born to physical life; the Church celebrates it when a person is born to eternal life. There are only three exceptions to this, and they were made for very good reasons: the only physical birthdays in the liturgy are those of Our Divine Lord (December 25), of the Blessed Mother (September 8), and of St. John the Baptist (June 24). This is because each of these births marked a special infusion of Divine Life into the world: our Lord is Eternal Life; the Blessed Mother, through Her Immaculate Conception, participated in that Eternal Life from the first moment of Her Conception; and St. John the Baptist was sanctified in his mother's womb when he was visited by His Lord, still tabernacled within the Blessed Mother. These three exceptions rather prove than contradict the rule that life comes through death, spirituality through mortification, and the saving of the soul in eternity through the losing of it in time.

For when a soul has proved that it loved God above all things, and proved it by detachment from all that stood in the way of its fullhearted love, it is prepared to stand before Love; then it will, in the language of Newman, feel the pain of never having loved enough. And when, if such thy lot thou secst thy Joy The sight of Him will kindle in thy heart All tender, gracious, reverential thoughts. Thou wilt be sick with love, and yearn for Him . . . There is pleading in His pensive eyes Will pierce thee to the quick and trouble thee. And thou wilt hate and loathe thyself; for though Now sinless, thou wilt feel that thou hast sinned As never thou didst feel; and wilt desire To slink away and hide thee from His sight; And yet will have a longing eye to dwell Within the beauty of His countenance. And these two pains, so counter and so keen The longing for Him, when thou seest Him not; The shame of self at thong' lit of seeing Him Will be thy veriest, sharpest Purgatory.