

A Physician's Reflection on the Pain of Death

Sr. Jane Mary Firestone, RSM, MD

The frenzied search to find a means to provide for a death without pain is promulgated by many religious, political and medical leaders in society. Health care professionals and others often fall into the trap of inadvertently degrading the human dignity of death by attempting to block consciousness of the dying experience both in the dying person and in those observing the death process. Newer methods of dealing with the pain of death often provide a provisional pseudo comfort which masks the actual experience that the person is going through. Painless death is not always possible and the reasons for that are sometimes ignored.

This reflection provides the opportunity to consider what death is in light of the issues of God and person, and to look at the relationship of a person's pain to the actual death experience. Is it possible that the observable aspect of pain in the one who is dying is only a small part of the death experience? In masking that exterior manifestation, can the interior experience truly be known? Is there an interior aspect of pain beyond the sight of the one who is observing the suffering? If the nature of the human person as a composite of body and soul is ignored in our efforts to decrease bodily pain, we may actually be increasing the interior pain of the person, even though the OBSERVABLE suffering of the person may be less. These are rhetorical questions, to which no absolute answers can be made. However, a clarification of our thinking on so-called "painless death" can be made. The way we think about and approach the subject of pain is dependent on how we define the human person as a "suffering person".

We are assuming in this reflection that the human person is a composite of body and soul. As such, the experience of pain is not limited to a purely sense experience: pain is not only hurtful to the body, but more significantly, there is a movement of pain in the soul.

For the phenomenon of "pain" to be present, two things are required. First, there must be a deprivation of something which is good – for instance, the loss of skin integrity through a laceration. Second, the person who experiences the deprivation must perceive a LOSS. Thus, the person experiences the pain of the laceration not only in his body, but also in his soul, where there must be a perception of this pain as a loss. Pain "takes up residence" in the soul,

so to speak. The ancients understood this human experience of pain; in Psalm 6, “My body is wracked; my soul is wracked with pain.” So we may say that the exterior apprehension of pain in the human person is accompanied by the interior apprehension of pain.

The interior apprehension of pain is called “sorrow”. Palliation of the exterior apprehension of pain will be ineffective if the aspect of sorrow is ignored. “Sadness of the heart surpasses every outward wound.” (Summa Part II, Q35, art. 7). Those who are separate from the person who is suffering however, can only perceive the exterior aspect of “pain”.

Every experience of pain causes a “tremor” in both body and soul, a foretaste of the unavoidable experience of pain which is death. The soul fears the separation from the body; but for some, there will also be a fear of ceasing to exist, or a fear of the loss of salvation. Every person who is experiencing pain and/or sorrow has already begun the experience of death in some way.

The term “painless death” is a euphemism; it is both dishonest and a betrayal of confidence to the person who is suffering. Health care professionals, religious leaders and those in public office have an obligation to avoid the travesty of seducing people into believing the human experience of death can be without suffering. Unfortunately, this travesty is usually only realized as such when each person is faced with his or her own, personal death.

Death is above all a theological consideration. It demands that we face the questions of existence, non-existence and the afterlife. One of the assumptions of this paper is that there is an element of eternity in life which throughout our life is in the process of becoming. In the passage of time, as death approaches, we feel loss, but we actually gain more than we lose. All that we have done during our lifetime, all that we have experienced, can be “gathered together” in the experience of death. At the moment of death, the eternal breaks into time. Thus may death be truly painless: when the dying person has the opportunity to submit, freely and lovingly, to the Eternal One.