

“God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. . . It was through the devil's envy that death entered the world” (Wis 1:13; 2:24)(CCC 413)

## **Christian Death and the Human Person**

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Death happens to everyone, yet it is a great mystery. The above quotation from the book of Wisdom, as referenced in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, states a truth about death which is central to understanding why death does not make sense to us. It is because it was never supposed to happen.

Death is a consequence of sin. The Church's Magisterium, as authentic interpreter of the affirmations of Scripture and Tradition, teaches that death entered the world on account of man's sin. Even though man's nature is mortal God had destined him not to die. Death was therefore contrary to the plans of God the Creator and entered the world as a consequence of sin. “Bodily death, from which man would have been immune had he not sinned” is thus “the last enemy” of man left to be conquered (CCC 1008).

So the question any sane adult – or any child – might have at this point is: if God is so strong and so good, why won't He keep people from dying? In order to answer that question it is necessary to begin to look at what part we as human beings play in the reality of death.

Although set by God in a state of rectitude, man, enticed by the evil one, abused his freedom at the very start of history. He lifted himself up against God, and sought to attain his goal apart from him (GS 13 # 1).

By his sin Adam, as the first man, lost the original holiness and justice he had received from God, not only for himself but for all human beings. Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called “original sin”(CCC 415-417).

God gave Adam and all human beings who came after him the freedom to choose to oppose God's will in preference to his own will. Thus began the ancient conflict within the human person, between what he desires to do, and what he ought to do. Before the Fall of Adam, there was no tension between these; after the Fall of Adam, the tension knows no end.

No one really “desires” to die. When someone expresses a preference to die rather than to live, it is generally because he or she is not able to cope with his/her present situation in life because of pain, or injury, or emotional suffering, or loneliness. But for every human being, whether it is desired or not, death is inevitable. In light of this certitude, it might be reasonable to

ask, “Shouldn’t we try to make death ‘painless’”? The real question then becomes whether there can be such a thing as “painless” death?

Our faith teaches us that death is “the separation of the soul from the body” (CCC 1005). At the present time, when many Christians do not REALLY believe that there is such a thing as a “soul” because we are so steeped in a materialistic world view, we find it difficult to imagine what the “soul” is.

In Sacred Scripture the term "soul" often refers to human life or the entire human person. But "soul" also refers to the innermost aspect of man, that which is of greatest value in him, that by which he is most especially in God's image: "soul" signifies the spiritual principle in man (CCC 363).

The soul is actually the MOST important part of us, the LIFE of the person. The soul is what most like God in us is – it is the IMAGE of God. This truth gives the human person a great dignity – our souls are made in the image of God. This means that our souls will NEVER die – they are immortal. Our souls are also truly united with our bodies. When our souls go through the process of separation from our bodies, there will be a wrenching – because our bodies and souls are meant to be united. The fear of this separation event causes us to dread death, because our souls will be separated for a time from our natural bodies.

Death was transformed by our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ became fully human, while remaining fully divine. He chose to be born and live as a human person and subsequently to die as well. He chose to fully embrace the misery of our human condition, in submission to His Father’s will (CCC 1009).

And then in rising from the dead, He made it possible for each soul who has died with Him in Baptism, to rise with Him someday. When we “die” in Him, mystically, and sacramentally, we are given the sure hope of living forever in Him after our physical death. This reality changes and transforms our physical death in time, into something which can be wondrous – if we are able to unite ourselves with Him, in submission to God’s will for us (CCC 1011). Death becomes not a thing of terror before which we must cower in fear, but a loving call from God to be with Him forever.

The Church teaches that it is important to prepare for death. Primarily that preparation is an interior one, known only to each person. We can pray to be ready for the death that God has willed for us. We can unite ourselves with Our Lord sacramentally, in the Eucharist, and prepare

our consciences by regular participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We ask the Blessed Virgin Mary each time we say the “Hail, Mary” to pray for us at the “hour of our death”. St. Joseph, the patron of happy death, is also given to us as a helper (CCC 1014). Above all, we can accept humbly, from the hand of God Who loves us, all that He has willed for us, and to ask Our Lord for patience and a spirit of loving submission – to accept all that He wills for us now and at the time of our death.

For further reading, consider these resources:

Catechism of the Catholic Church

[410-421](#): “You did not abandon him to the power of death.”

[1005-1014](#): “To rise with Christ, we must die with Christ.”

[Gaudium et Spes #18](#): “It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence grows most acute.”

The Bible: Online [Revised Standard Version](#)(RSV) or [New American Bible](#) (NAB)

[Romans 14:7-8](#): “None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself.”

[1 Corinthians 15:20-26](#): “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

[1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#): “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”