

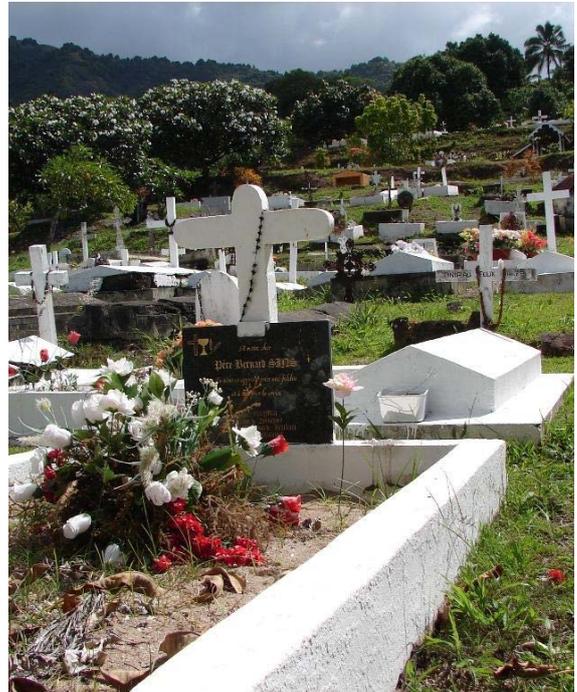
Death

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Our desire,
expressed in the formula of profession,
is to live and die in the service
of the Sacred Hearts.
When the end of life draws near,
what we want to do is prepare ourselves
to die as believers,
and to make of our death
an act of praise for the God who loves us.
In that way,
our death will be a witness to Christ,
a final act of mission.

38th General Chapter (2012)
Mission, 37



Atuona (Marquesas Islands)
Tombs of SSCC missionaries

The last **General Chapter** spoke of death. The paragraph quoted above invites us to prepare ourselves to die as believers. It also says that we are called to make of our death an act of mission. The passage is both beautiful and dense. Let us take the opportunity to read it again slowly...It's worth meditating on.

The **Constitutions** speak of death. They don't say a lot, it's true, but they refer to it in order to set the overall framework for our life. In the formula of profession (Art. 17) we express our desire to live *and die* in the service of the Sacred Hearts. Article 56 asks that we pray for those who have died, for we believe in *the communion that continues to bind us to the deceased brothers and sisters of our Congregation*. And Article 66 says that the process of formation, growth and renewal to which we commit ourselves when we enter the Congregation is *life-long*, in other words, it continues until our death.

Some days ago, as we celebrated the beatification of our Spanish brothers, martyred during the last century, we were speaking of death. When the Church beatifies a martyr, she doesn't look so much at the whole of his life but how he died. The martyr dies as Jesus: trusting in God (the witness of faith) and forgiving his persecutors (witness of charity).

(As I'm writing this reflection on death, I just received news of the death in Spain of our brother Ángel Lucas, who was Postulator General for many years. He was a faithful

servant of the Congregation, which he loved intensely. As Enrique Losada, his provincial said, *Angel died just a few days after the beatification of our Martyrs, something for which he had worked tirelessly and at which he could not be present because of deteriorating health. May Damien, Eustaquio, Teofilo and his Companions, for whose recognition as saint and blessed he so generously dedicated years of his life, be forever his companions in the presence of the Father.*)

This is also the month of November, which begins with the feast of All Saints followed by All Souls Day and which ends with the closing of the Year of Faith.

So let us speak of death and of our own death, because **we are all going to die.**

People don't speak of death much. It's **a topic to be avoided.** The news and movies make the death of others seem a show; however it makes us uncomfortable to speak of our own death. The dominant culture encourages us to camouflage signs of approaching death. We are told that the most important thing is to keep ourselves young and healthy. It is said that the way the consumer society functions is based precisely in this resistance to confront the unavoidable reality of death.

Rarely do we speak of death with the sick and elderly. We keep it from them with clichés, as well-intentioned as they are empty: "everything will be fine," "you'll be better in no time," "hope is the last thing to go." etc. What is so evident and inevitable we treat with silence and we leave the dying person abandoned to their anxiety unable to find someone with whom they can speak and unburden themselves.

In everyday conversation, it's considered bad manners to bring up death. If you do, you're a wet blanket and the other person will more often than not respond with some attempt at humor.

Death frightens us. Death says that our life has an expiration date and that all our efforts to justify our existence are ultimately in vain. Death frightens us because of the pain, limitation and solitude that accompany it. What's more, death secretly brings with it a judgment on everything we have been and done, forcing us to face our sin and our mediocrity with a rawness that we usually can't stand when we still feel strong. Death strips us of everything and brings the curtain down on our performance.

Death is not only a far off event in an uncertain future. Death is a daily reality. In fact it is with us from the moment we are born. As time passes, we feel it ever more present. Sickness comes, health fails, we can't do things that we once considered easy, the burden of life becomes heavier, we tire easily, our strength fails us. However death can come at any time: an accident, an unexpected health problem, an act of violence...We think of breakdowns in relationships, good-byes, projects we never finish, the experience of failure, limits, solitude...death is already present. The end is with us right from the beginning.

For us as believers, **we can never think of death without reference to faith.** Just as we cannot witness to our faith without speaking of death. Jesus confronted death, he passed through it and he overcame it. In Jesus, God saves us. This salvation is a mystery of faith. It is beyond our explanations but it is something sure.

How does God save us and from what? God did not save Jesus from the cross. He did not save the martyrs from the firing squad. God does not save from sickness or danger. He doesn't prevent our dying. It is true that God hears the cry of the poor and suffering, but his powerful response is only revealed after we have breathed our last.

God saves us with his love and that love is stronger than death. Benedict XVI said that there is something in us that rejects death because we think that love requires and expects eternity. And so faith does justice to the deepest desire of the human heart. We are not heading toward annihilation but life! It is impossible that the last word be separation, suffering and injustice! This desire is written in the core of our being because God has created us that way. It is his fingerprint in us, the mark of the one who is a "lover of life." (Wis. 11:26)

The love of God gives us eternal life. We are called to rise with Jesus. Without that resurrection, without that life after death, our faith is in vain, prayer for the dead is meaningless as are the causes of the saints, vain also is our proclamation of the Gospel, vain is our hope.

Faith leads to the foolishness of rejoicing over things that, without life after death, would be but darkness and frustration. Faith celebrates the ignominious death of Jesus on the cross as a victory. Faith celebrates the murder of the martyrs and declares happy (blessed) those who lost their life violently and unjustly in the flower of youth. Faith congratulates and praises those who ruin their health, their fortune and their personal security in order to better serve and love others. Faith demonstrates clearly that what is most important is not to preserve and care for one's life but to surrender it to others and lose it. Even though it doesn't answer all the questions or dispel all the darkness, faith is light for the journey. Faith allows us to see that the love of God, his grace, is more valuable than life.

This was the witness given a short while ago by a brother of the Congregation. He was sick and was saying goodbye to his parishioners before moving to another place to continue treatment. He told them, *"Pray for me, not so much that I'll get better but so that I do not lose the faith."*

In many cultures, a long life is considered a blessing. Today medicine, at least in the rich countries, offers the majority of the population a longer and longer life. They say that people of my generation are going to live to be a hundred. It bothers me just to think of it. Why is it better to live a very long life than a shorter one? **Why work so hard at living longer?** Isn't it perhaps more inspiring and consoling to recognize that we are pilgrims on this earth? Our life is a journey at the end of which God is waiting to embrace us and welcome us to his home, which is our real fatherland and our true home. If we look at things like that, what does a long life offer that a short one doesn't?

Along the way, we shouldn't be alarmed by the progressive deterioration of our body. The body has its own wisdom and will not deceive us if we know how to listen to it. Without fail it lets us know what stage of the journey we are at and what we have to do at each stage. When we are young, it impels us to work, create and transform things and so we learn to serve. When sick, it forces us to rest and teaches us to suffer, and so we become a brother/sister to those who live with all kinds of suffering in our world. In old age, the body shows us the way of passivity, taking things slowly, preparing our hearts for the experience of grace, which is the only thing that saves. For that reason the body is beautiful even with wrinkles, scars and calluses. Through them the body speaks to us of love, suffering and the journey we have made and it foretells the hopeful surrender to which we are called. This is the flesh that will rise again, as the Creed proclaims.

A person who faces death with faith and love is the best proof that God exists and the greatest consolation for those who remain in this world. **To come to the end of live with the serenity of faith and the humility of a disciple** is the greatest witness that can be given to the mercy of God, by whom we will be welcomed, judged and saved in the end. Thus, as our General Chapter said, death becomes a final act of mission because it helps others to encounter the Father.

To prepare to die in this way is to already to live with a hope that frees us from that stinginess that often ties us down and does not allow us to be generous and happy. Hope like this can be the firm foundation for a love that is robust, a love in which others can find support without fearing that we will fail them.

Brothers, we who want to live and die in the service of the Sacred Hearts, how do we face our death? How do we want to die? How can we help one another prepare for death?

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A bus driver in Colombia put up a picture of Jesus on the upper part of the windshield. On the image were the words, "If this is my last trip...let it be to you." At every moment of life, we are going toward the Lord. We know neither the day nor the hour. What we do know is that the closer death is, the closer we are getting to Him. And so, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me...I am going to prepare a place for you"* (Jn. 14: 1-2)

