



From A Bishop's Journal (619)

What Happens to the Dead?

During November when we traditionally commemorate all the dead, I would like to talk to you about a book by Sister Marie-Thérèse Nadeau, C.N.D., professor at the Dominican College of Philosophy and Theology in Ottawa. Her book has just been published by Médiaspaul, and is called *Que deviennent les morts ?* ["What Happens to the Dead?"]. It may well be that in the spring of 2006 we have the privilege of having Sister Nadeau in Edmundston: she is well-known in our diocese, for having taken part in our Eucharistic Congresses and a novena to St. Anne.

Many Questions

Sister Marie-Thérèse Nadeau takes us directly to the very heart of this great mystery of human life: "We all die," she writes, "but when do we take the time to think about this reality which is as mysterious as it is inevitable, to deepen the meaning of death, in human destiny? For instance, do we often think of the fact that life is such precisely because of death? That death is the price to pay, to live? Have we even verified whether it is true or not that but for Adam's sin, we would never have died? Have we sometimes considered the importance of Christ's death and resurrection, of the impact of the paschal mystery on our own death? And is it true that all does not end with death? If such is the case, what happens to the dead? What does resurrection mean if it has nothing to do with reanimation or reincarnation? In what body do the dead rise again? When do they resurrect? At the moment of death, or long after? Is it likely that we come across our friends and acquaintances, in the world beyond?" These are some of the questions raised in the book. As for the answers, they are enlightening, calming, unpretentious, capable of raising in each one of us the desire of welcoming death, of making death a true act of freedom.

Difficult Conversation

It is not easy to talk about death, whether in the hospital or the funeral home. We must often bear alone the burden of questioning. There are some who believe so strongly that everything ends in death, and others are filled with doubt or unbelief. However, death is a reality we have to confront sooner or later. This reality affects our existence more than we believe. "Let us not dismiss these questions and others like them too easily, questions that rush to the mind of many people, especially as old age sets in and the body changes and deteriorates. Besides, could these questions be our own? Therefore, rather than consider them outlandish and dismiss them out of hand only to have them return to haunt us, let us try to answer them, taking into account what we already know on the subject. Anyhow, this is what we would like to do with those who read this book. We hope that we

shall not be considered pretentious as we consider realities which we ourselves have evidently not experienced. While not satisfying all our expectations, our many readings in philosophy, theology, and scripture have sufficiently opened interesting and enlightening avenues to give us a desire to share our thoughts with the public. Moreover, we would be well rewarded if we could help this public experience the joy, serenity, and appeasement which we ourselves have experienced in studying a theme as fundamental and mysterious as that of what lies beyond death.”

Unimaginable Death

“The best glimpse we can have into our own death doubtlessly happens at the death of a loved one. The death of a spouse, a child, a parent, a close friend does not shed total light on our own demise. Still, in taking a piece of our being – the loved one who is forever taken away from us – we are given an intuition of our own death. Anyhow, there are many testimonies to the fact that it is through the death of someone irreplaceable to us that we discover to what extent death concerns us, and to what degree, in a sense, it already shines in us. It is henceforth impossible not to take death seriously, not to feel its ever-burning certainty.”

Through the Ages

Before discussing the Christian aspect of death, Sister Marie-Thérèse does not want to rush through its human stage. “Let us make clear that the considerations on death which open this volume apply to everybody, believer and non believer. We shall evidently not delay in looking at death in the light of Christ, and to ask ourselves what happens to death in the wake of his death-resurrection. Nevertheless, it must be clear from the onset that we shall not bring in the faith dimension before having tried to understand as best we can what death represents in the life journey of everyone, and before insisting on the fact that every human has a right to his own death with, of course, everything associated with it.” In the first part of the book, Sister Nadeau looks at the human being and death: the inevitable death, the unimaginable death, death yesterday and today. In part two, she discusses the Christian and death: death in Scripture and the importance of Jesus’ death. In part three, she discusses the “beyond” of death: intuitions of the afterlife, the afterlife in the Old Testament and the New Testament, “What does it mean, to resurrect, to rise again?” and “When do we resurrect?”

A Book That Does Good

It has not been my aim, here, to bring you Sister Nadeau’s answers to the questions she raises in the book’s Introduction, but I would like to end with another quote from this small, 140-page book: “The bottom line is that we would like to see, when the time comes, that all have a right to their death, and make of it a last act of freedom. Can such a death, already anticipated in baptism and confirmation, open elsewhere than to a life of communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? We do not think so.”

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11-16-05