

What is the Meaning of the Expression ‘A Happy Death?’

— by Peter Nobes



St. Joseph is the patron of a Happy Death.

Interest in the topic

This paper explores the meaning of “a Happy Death,” why there is fear of death, and how death was transformed by Christ. It looks at how we may motivate the Catholic community to prepare for “the hour of our death.” As Director of Catholic Cemeteries for the Archdiocese of Vancouver, I’m interested in the topic so we can enrich the education and pastoral care provided to Catholics. Some insights are described below:

- Like our culture, the majority of adult faithful avoid the topic of death as evidenced by only 2% of Catholic adults having pre-arrangement burial plans (with Catholic Cemeteries; some have plans with corporate cemeteries that we do not know about).
- In Sherry Weddell’s book *Forming Intentional Disciples*,¹ she cites a Barna Research Group study indicating that only 37% of American Catholics connect Easter with the Resurrection¹. I’m sure this figure is reflective of our archdiocese.

- Gerald O’Collins in his book *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*² states “what is perhaps more serious has been the failure of some Christian theologians to explain the Resurrection.” So many in our Catholic community don’t understand its significance.
- Primary research interviews fielded by Catholic Cemeteries found that the fear of death and the fear of loss of control and freedom to be the primary reasons for the avoidance of planning³.

The meaning of Christ’s death and the Resurrection is not well understood in terms of what it means for one’s own mortality and journey to eternal life.

Why is there fear of death?

In meetings between Catholic Cemeteries and members of the Catholic Healthcare Association of BC, reference to the Kubler-Ross model has been cited many times. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was a psychiatrist who wrote a book in 1969 called *On Death and Dying* inspired by her work with terminally ill patients. She developed a model with five stages of grief, a series of emotions experienced by terminally ill patients prior to death. These include denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (details are provided in the appendix).

Today’s culture avoids the topic of death and there is the denial factor cited by Kubler-Ross. In Bernard Lonergan’s excerpt *Theology in its New Context*⁴, he reminds us that contemporary Catholic theology has to not only be Catholic but also ecumenist. Its concerns must reach not only to Christians but also non-Christians and atheists drawing on modern philosophies and new sciences. Death must be addressed in this context. The Church has not convinced the culture, let alone much of its own community, of the empirical evidence of Christ’s death and Resurrection.

Declining health, our human experience of death, the promise of eternal life can be events looked forward to instead of avoided. Our culture could be challenged to ask if death means we become “cosmic dust” or is there something beyond physical death of the body?

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¹ Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples* (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc. July, 2012), 98-99.

² Gerald O’Collins, SJ *Rethinking Fundamental Theology, Towards a New Fundamental Theology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Chapter 6.

³ Right Brain Research Study, April 2015. Facilitated by Glass Canvas Media. Explored emotional benefits and barriers to death and pre-arrangement planning. Proprietary research.

⁴ Lonergan, Bernard, SJ *The Theology in Its New Context, A Second Collection*. Collected works of Bernard Lonergan vol. 13. (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2016) Pg. 48-59.

⁵ The Catechism of the Catholic Church (Doubleday Publishing. April 1995). Imprimi Potest +Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Interdicasterial Commission for the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The Meaning of a 'Happy Death'; continued

Every Mass is a memorial Mass celebrating Christ's life, death and Resurrection. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (Catechism)⁵ paragraph 1005 states:

To rise with Christ, we must die with Christ: we must "be away from the body and at home with the Lord." 562ⁱ In that "departure" which is death the soul is separated from the body. 563ⁱⁱ It will be reunited with the body on the day of the resurrection of the dead. 564ⁱⁱⁱ.

We teach this to parishioners and the great hope in the Resurrection. Catechism 1006 captures this essence:

For those who die in Christ's grace it is a participation in the death of the Lord, so that they can also share His Resurrection.

We try and state this in simple terms in that death is the end of earthly life and God calls man to Himself (paragraph 1007). In this lies the challenge facing clergy, cemeterians and healthcare professionals to name a few. How do we do a better job of getting our community better informed? How do we get them more curious and have a stronger religious sense around the Resurrection and what it means personally?

What is the meaning of the expression — a 'Happy Death'?

The definition of death is the cessation of living functions; and happiness is defined as contentment. These definitions were sourced at Merriam-Webster online. A Happy Death would be contentment at the end of living functions (definitions are in the appendix).

We frequently hear of a peaceful death or a happy death or sometimes a comment "he/she died in grace." Let us look at Saint Joseph, the patron of many things, but he is also the patron of dying and "a happy death." According to the Catholic Tradition website⁶, the reasons Saint Joseph is the special patron of dying includes:

- 1) He is the foster father of the Eternal Judge, who can refuse him no request;
- 2) He is terrible to the demons; the Church calls him the Terror of demons and Conqueror of Hell;
- 3) His own death was most beautiful, for he died in the arms of Jesus and Mary; this is the principal reason why he is the patron of a happy death; the death no other Saint was so happy, so glorious. St. Francis de Sales was of the opinion that St. Joseph died of the love of God; St. Alphonsus Liguori considered this most reasonable.

A couple prayers are included in the appendix section.

The Catechism outlines this in paragraph 1014:

The Church encourages us to prepare ourselves for the hour of our death. In the ancient litany of the saints, for instance,

she has us pray: "From a sudden and unforeseen death, deliver us O Lord"; 586 to ask the Mother of God to intercede for us "at the hour of our death" in the Hail Mary; and to entrust ourselves to St. Joseph, the patron of a happy death.

The majority of the people Catholic Cemeteries encounters are not prepared for the hour of their death. Although in the face of declining function, cognitive ability and other realities, the older adult should prepare accordingly. Death can be faced with fear, anxiety and avoidance, but if we go through the Kubler-Ross cycle we eventually come to acceptance. So how do we accelerate acceptance and perhaps leapfrog over things like denial and anger and get to acceptance through faith teaching? St. Joseph is a wonderful model of acceptance, spiritual preparedness and grace.

Death is transformed by Christ

The Catechism teaches us in paragraph 1009:

Jesus, the Son of God, also himself suffered the death that is part of the human condition. Yet, despite his anguish as he faced death, he accepted it in an act of complete and free submission to his Father's will. 572^v The obedience of Jesus has transformed the curse of death into a blessing.

Our task as Catholic leaders is to help our community submit to the Lord's will. Both my in-laws died in the past 9 months. I saw Grace at work as they both had compassionate spiritual care in the last 24 months of their lives. My father-in-law had not received the Eucharist in years but he was a very faithful man. He and my mother-in-law had a civil marriage because my mother-in-law went to nursing school in post-war Communist Poland and had to renounce her faith and become communist to attain education support. Out of pride and a sense of what's right, my father-in-law for years didn't enjoy the fullness of our faith.

Although attending church along the way, they had excellent pastoral care in the last two-and-a-half years. The pastor of the local church met them on many occasions and a sister, "Sister Mary," made pastoral home visits. My father-in-law made a good confession and started receiving the Eucharist. They received the sacrament of marriage just 24 months ago at the ages of 91 and 81 and both received the Sacrament of the Sick. In short, they fully reconciled with the Church and benefited from pastoral care including education on their eternal life destiny. In my impression I'd say they both died "a Happy Death," in *grace* and in *full communion* with the Church. I saw a gradual letting go of earthly matters; letting go of a need to control the house finances, letting go of earthly worries in the confession process, putting end-of-life care plans in place, including funeral arrangements, burial arrangements, and generally having their earthly affairs settled. Death was transformed by Christ.

Mary vs. Joan

In our parish presentations, I cite two additional personal experiences. When I moved to BC as a young man in my mid-twenties, I befriended a wonderful retired school teacher who was 72. She became my best friend and she had a strong faith. She had chronic illnesses and I became her care advocate. In the late stages of illness

Standing the Test of Time

Durability for New Orleans Mausoleums — *Building with Granite*

— by Johnny Phillips

Established in New Orleans in 1872 on one of the city's highest points, Metairie Cemetery contains a vast assortment of stone tombs and statuary. Whether simple or elaborate, the stone tombs, crypts and mausoleums are an impressive sight. Beautifully sculpted angels, ancient Egyptian-inspired crypts and massive family vaults rise from the ground in rows like soldiers protecting the city's primordial secrets. While different in architecture and adornment, each above-ground tomb shares the need to stand the test of time.

Long-Term Durability

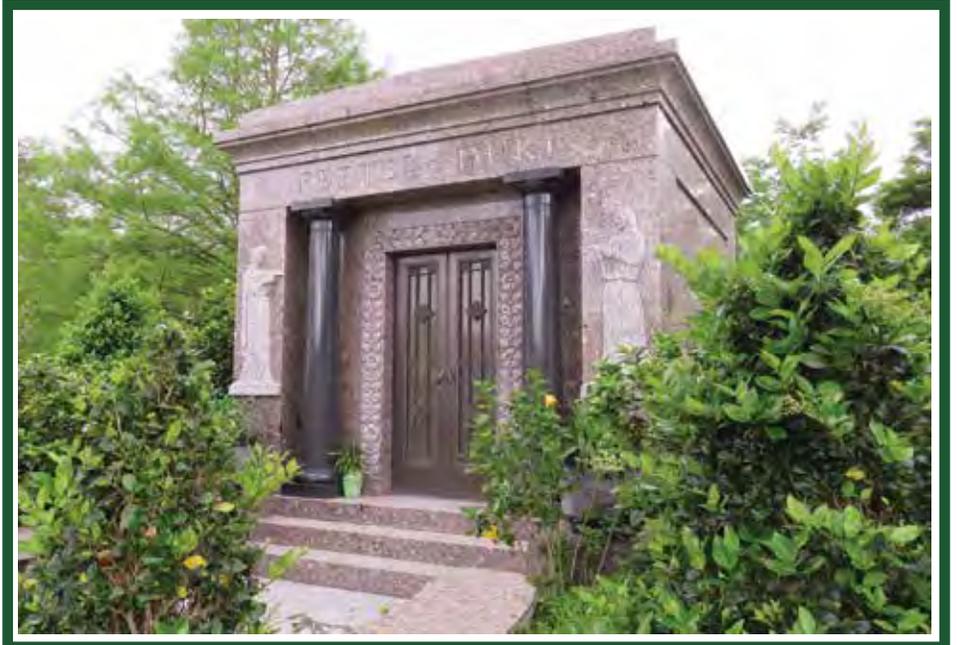
The tradition of above-ground burial in New Orleans dates to 1789, when the St. Louis No.1 Cemetery first opened. The practice of vaulted entombment is due in part to the Crescent City's Southern European heritage, where rocky soils typically made above-ground burials necessary. Environmental factors also contribute to vaulted tombs in New Orleans, which is located on the Mississippi River Delta and is known for its high water table.

Today, 90 percent of burials in New Orleans are above ground, and crypts and mausoleums in the historic city must be as enduring as the traditions upon which the city was founded. Granite provides the ideal choice for its natural durability. Performance characteristics of this igneous rock include unmatched durability that will produce a structure to last for generations.

Granite's long lifespan contributes to a total lifecycle cost that appeals to many mausoleum owners. With little to no maintenance, granite retains its beautiful appearance, even in outdoor applications. In Metairie Cemetery, one of the city's oldest cemeteries, granite is the building material of choice. Here, granite mausoleums have withstood the test of time, with an expected lifespan of generations to come.

Increased Personalization

Decades ago, two beautiful mausoleums at Metairie Cemetery were built on that property by Coldspring. The Fertel-Duke mausoleum (*shown above*), completed in 1999, was commissioned by Ruth's Chris Steak House founder Ruth Fertel and her longtime friend and business partner Lana Duke. Situated on a 27-foot plot, the mausoleum has a cocoa-colored appearance and features Sunset Beige, Impala Black and Carnelian shades of granite. The mausoleum holds six and is designed for Fertel family on one side and Duke family on the other.



With its black columns and stained glass windows, the Fertel-Duke mausoleum features a variety of granite and sits on a square 26-foot plot at Metairie Cemetery.

With black columns and stained glass windows depicting angels and the words of Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World," the mausoleum demonstrates the trend toward personalization in mausoleum design. Increasingly, personalized designs have brought some of the biggest changes to the mausoleum industry in recent years.

Not very long ago, columbaria and mausoleums typically featured very basic and generic designs. Today, the materials, finishes and overall design of the projects tend to be much more elaborate and provide increased differentiation. Bronze, granite, beveled glass, mosaics and stationary all provide options for designs that tell the story of a loved one's life.

Working closely with customers to gain an understanding of their wants and needs allows cemeteries to appropriately incorporate highly customized designs. Therefore, listening and asking questions to gain a true understanding of needs are important to learn what the families are seeking.

Technologically advanced granite providers can customize memorials with different carving and etching techniques. Cemeteries should be sure to understand what the customer is asking for but should also understand that there are limitations with certain stone. For example, laser etching isn't recommended on a white stone. In other applications, highlight or darkening agents may be used to ensure the engraving detail is easy to see.

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What Does It Mean 'To Serve?' — by Michael Cherry, Ed.D.

Since 2014, I have had the honor of presenting at the CCC School of Leadership & Management Excellence. Being able to dialogue about leadership, team building and ethics has provided me a deep insight into the rewards, and challenges, cemetery leaders face as they serve a wide variety of constituents.

One of the leadership theories that we explore in the School of Leadership is *Servant Leadership*, which was coined by Robert Greenleaf in 1970. This approach to leadership suggests that the servant-leader is servant first. Servant leadership begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve then, conscious choice, brings one to aspire to lead. It has been suggested that the best tests to determine if one is a servant leader, or to identify servant leadership, is to answer the following questions:

- Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely, themselves, to become servants?
- And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?

Participants in the School move quickly from definitions to questions about how to implement leadership theories in their 'real-life.' The following nine characteristics of servant leadership often inform participants' approach to becoming servant leaders and improving their leadership skills. The characteristics are:

- * Listening * Empathy * Healing * Persuasion
- * Conceptualization * Foresight * Stewardship
- * Building Community * Commitment to the Growth of People

While these characteristics are helpful, examples often brings the theory to life. Two of my favorite quotations that, I believe, demonstrate servant leadership are the following:

• *The image of George Washington kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge says something about the method of all leadership - humble, modest service.* — George Sweeting

* *The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.* — Max de Pree

I am certain cemetery leaders will continue to find joy and be challenged in their leadership roles. Perhaps the principles and practice of Servant Leadership can assist in developing more informed, purposeful and collaborative leadership. ✍

Helpful Resources on Servant Leadership:

DePree, M. (1989). *Leadership is an Art*. New York: Dell Publishing.

Greenleaf, R.K. (1977). *Servant Leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.
<https://www.greenleaf.org/>

Sipe, J.W. & Frick, D.M. (2009). *Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership: Practicing the wisdom of leading by serving*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.



*Your Cemetery Could be
Featured on the CCC Website!*

Photo, St. Agnes Cemetery
courtesy of the Diocese of Albany.

Enter a photo of your cemetery for a chance to be featured on the CCC Website home page. We are seeking photos of member cemeteries of all sizes, types and geographical regions that depict our Catholic cemetery ministry. Each accepted photo will be displayed for one-three months as the main banner photo. Be sure to submit high quality, high resolution images that can be cropped to 1,500 pixels wide by 500 pixels tall. If you are interested in this promotional opportunity, please contact Rita Kaufman, Associate Executive Director, rkaufman@catholiccemeteryconference.org or by phone at 708.202.1242.