

DAY #12: Meditation

DEATH

[71] - *If the one giving the Exercises judges that it would be profitable for the exercitant, **other** exercises may be added here, for example, on **death** and other punishments of sin, on **judgment**, etc. Let him not think this is forbidden, though they are not given here.*

This point is the basis for several of the meditations that are found in the tradition of the Spiritual Exercises although not directly in the manual of the Spiritual Exercises, such as this one.

As a reminder, all of our meditations should follow these same basic steps:

- 1 – Place oneself in the presence of God
- 2 – Preparatory Prayer (asking God for grace)
- 3 – Composition of Place (a sensible image in imagination related to the meditation at hand)
- 4 – History (this applies more to ‘contemplations’ on the life and mysteries of Christ)
- 5 – Petition (the grace we are asking for)
- 6 – the “Points” (the substance of the meditation)
- 7 – the Colloquy (our conversation with God, Christ, and Mary, depending on the meditation)
- 8 – Examination (after our meditation, some time can be devoted to seeing how we were in the time of prayer).

First, place oneself in the presence of God:

[75] - *I will stand for the space of an **Our Father**, a step or two before the place where I am to meditate or contemplate, and with my mind raised on high, consider that God our Lord beholds me, etc. Then I will make an act of reverence or humility.*

This is an important step that should never be overlooked. We are first and foremost **praying**, that is, talking with God. We should fight off anything that makes our prayer a mere ‘process of steps’. Yes, we have steps and order (as Christ did when He taught us how to pray), but we shouldn’t allow it to dominate the spirit of prayer.

Second, the “Preparatory Prayer”:

Preparatory Prayer: [46] – “I will **beg** God our Lord for grace that all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely to the praise and service of His Divine Majesty”.

Preludes

1 – Composition of Place - *Here it will be to see either the room in which a person has just died, perhaps in the hospital, with its dim light, or a funeral home, with the coffin containing the corpse, and the candles lighted on both sides. **Or***

Picture yourself, moments before death. It could be any time, at night, in the day, surrounded by family or alone.. Taking your last few breaths. You have perhaps less than an hour. (spend some time on this...particular judgment...you are about to meet the Man with 5 wounds.)

Or (consider a personal experience you have had where you thought death was near)

Notice that it ought to be something “concrete”. We will die in a certain place and time, in certain circumstances. We should not spend too much time in this practice; some find the composition very helpful, others can get lost trying to think up an image.

****2 – Grace/Petition:** *I should ask for what I desire, and that is **grace to correct and repair whatever was worldly, inordinate, or sinful in my past life; and to regulate my remaining years in such a manner as will ensure a happy death.***

This is one of the most fundamental parts of the meditation; we are asking God for **what I desire**. *Ask and you shall receive...* We are praying and begging our God for a specific grace, the “fruit” of the meditation that we hope to obtain.

Preliminary Notes

As we said, there isn't a particular meditation provided by St. Ignatius, but he does suggest it can be helpful.

Death changes everything. It is a powerful reminding of the shortness of our life. Naturally speaking, we need “deadlines” to act; we cannot move without an end. It is very easy for us to think we have more time. So, a consideration of death can be very helpful, as we are striving for indifference, to reform what is deformed, to prepare the ground that the seed may have a bountiful harvest. It is also easy for us to forget about the **reality** of death (especially in our current times)

1- CERTAINTY OF DEATH

The fact of death is the most certain, of undeniable experience. It is a punishment for man having sinned, since we were created immortal: «*On the day you eat of this fruit, **you will die***» (Gen 2:17); man lost the gift of immortality. «*You are dust, and to **dust you shall return***» (Gen 3:19).

In the Letter to the Hebrews we are reminded that “*it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment.*” (Heb 9:27)

We will all die; it is the **most certain** thing about any human being's future. The rest of a person's life we do not know, but we do know that they will die. Just as one day we are born, one day we die. Just as now, when we remember our deceased relatives, we say 'my dear grandfather,' and recall anecdotes with affection, so too will those who come after me remember me. Because **this life ends**. For example, when you go to a maternity hospital, you see newborns, tender, lovely. But we do not know what will become of their lives, what they will do. There is only one thing we *do* know about those babies: we don't know in how much time, but those people will die. Death is certain.

No one can say they **will not die**. Many do not want to think about death because perhaps they are not living well (that is, in God's grace); they seek to evade that thought. But death is the teacher of life; it teaches us to live well.

The mourning bells of churches remind us of this. One day, perhaps the bells will also ring for our death.

They remind us of this with the Masses offered for the deceased, the cemeteries, the deaths we see every day, etc. And perhaps before too long, in some church, a Mass will be offered for our eternal rest and they will say our name.

We must **prepare for death**, since it is the most important moment of life, because there our eternity is decided.

Arturo Toscanini, the Italian orchestra conductor, lived 90 years. When he turned 80, his students played a joke on him and he returned it, saying: "think that when I have to change the battery of this watch, neither I nor any of you will be alive."

2- THE TIME AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF DEATH ARE UNCERTAIN

Death comes on the day and at the hour least expected, like a thief who surprises us (cf. Mt 24:36 ff). This ignorance is for our benefit, so that we are always alert and well prepared. This uncertainty about the hour of death requires on our part to always be prepared, in God's grace.

Consider the surprise killings, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, accidents; am I ready to die at any moment?

James 4:14 - *Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.*

Why does God not share with us the time of our death so that we may be ready?

“Our last day is hidden from us, so that we may sanctify all our days.” (St. Augustine)

If we knew the day and hour of our death, we are so fragile that we would probably sin until that day and wait until the last moment to convert. Then, our soul would be so darkened that we would not have the strength to turn back to God. That is why God is so merciful in hiding from us the moment of death.

Some of us have seen young people die in circumstances we would never have thought they would pass away. We should not be pessimistic; we should be **prepared**.

Not like the rich man in the Gospel who:

“(…) had a field that produced an abundant harvest (…). Then I will say: "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you. And

the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21)

Therefore, this meditation must arouse in us the firm purpose to live well, holy, as if we were to die today. To convert. To live in such a way that if God wanted to call me today, I would have nothing on my conscience to regret for having denied anything to God.

The philosopher **Voltaire**, who for years had expressed his panic at the possibility of being thrown into a dump, as happened to those who died without receiving the last rites and, in the case of public and known sinners, without a formal retraction of their faults, thought of approaching religion and agreed to write a retraction and even to confess. However, when the priests arrived and had given Voltaire all possible recommendations to retract and ask for confession, he stubbornly and furiously rejected the sacraments; and thus, unaided, he died in terrible pain. He **blasphemed, threatened, vomited** the greatest insults, particularly against those assisting him, and he punished them when they approached. Shortly before expiring, he had great convulsions, making such gestures that terrified those around him.

As he always lived, so he died.

3 – SACRED SCRIPTURE ON DEATH AND JUDGMENT

“What must I do?” → “*Watch & be ready*”

To help us consider death, it can be helpful to examine some of our Lord’s parables regarding death and judgment:

Mt 25:1-13 (parable of 10 virgins; oil of charity; ran out...)

*Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids^[d] took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.^[u] ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those bridesmaids^[d] got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids^[d] came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep **awake** therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*

The lesson is clear. We do not know when Christ will return, so we must stay on guard, and keep our lamps full of the oil of charity.

Parable of the Talents

Mt 25:14 –30 (Parable of the Talents)

¹⁴ “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents,^[a] to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

The master will return. He has given me something, a task and responsibility. What have I done with my talent? We must **use** what we have been given; we cannot bury the talent.

Mt 7:21-23 (Concerning Self-Deception)

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ ²³ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

Do I profess my faith publicly? Or am I ashamed of Jesus Christ my Lord?

We will not fear death if we live ready for death.

In a number of sacristies, you see a message for priests: “*Priest of God, celebrate this Mass as though it were your first Mass, your last Mass, and your only Mass.*” Imagine how well we would receive communion if we received it as our first communion, our last communion, and our only communion. What devotion and love we would have! (Dreyer, *Take* v1, 117)

Additional reading from Scripture can include Wisdom 3 and Sirach 41:

- 1 *O death, how bitter is the thought of you
to the one at peace among possessions,
who has nothing to worry about and is prosperous in everything,
and still is vigorous enough to enjoy food!*
- 2 *O death, how welcome is your sentence
to one who is needy and failing in strength,
worn down by age and anxious about everything;
to one who is contrary, and has lost all patience!*
- 3 *Do not fear death's decree for you;
remember those who went before you and those who will come after.*
- 4 *This is the Lord's decree for all flesh;
why then should you reject the will of the Most High?
Whether life lasts for ten years or a hundred or a thousand,
there are no questions asked in Hades. (Sirach 41: 1-4)*

4 - PREPARATION FOR DEATH

How can we have a calmness like the saints in the face of death? Let us consider 4 ways:

First – prayer and a devout sacramental life (Holy Mass, rosary, liturgy of the hours)

Second – a constant striving for perfection (virtue)

Third – practice recollection, the presence of God

Fourth – to always live with death on the mind.

Over the years, I've come to know some, some of our priests, who would end every day with the “**ok, good night, see you tomorrow...God-willing.**” A very **genuine** understand that nothing is ‘guaranteed’ or ‘owed’. Our life is a **gift**. We must be ready at every moment.

Again – we are on the verge of death; will I have wanted to “have fun”, or drawn close to Jesus at every moment?

Living with Death in mind

Perhaps we need to rethink what “life” is. We are not simply trying to “be ready for death”.

In our baptism, we have the seed of heaven, and we begin to live eternity now in a sense.

In other words, our life is meant to be a natural unfolding, a natural growth that reaches its final perfection in heaven. It is the “ship” St. Therese talked about finally reaching shore. *The world is thy ship not thy home.*

Or the young Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati: “I believe that the day of my death will be the most beautiful day of my life.”

*My eager expectation and hope is that I shall not be put to shame in any way, but that with all boldness, now as always, Christ will be magnified in my body, **whether by life or by death** For to me life is Christ, and death is gain. If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. And I do not know which I shall choose. I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, [for] that is far better. Yet that I remain [in] the flesh is more necessary for your benefit. (Phil 1:20-24)*

In other words, for the saint, that is, the one living to seek the living God, death is a moment of liberation, of entering into the house of the Father:

*And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will **rest** from their labors, for their deeds follow them. (Rev 14:13)*

Consider the deaths of some of the saints:

- St. Stephen – *Lord Jesus receive my spirit* (Acts 7:59);
- St. Bernadette, *Holy Mary, pray for me a sinner.*
- St. John Paul II – *Let me go to the house of the Father.*

Ps 116:15 - *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones.*

(St. John of the Cross: *Spiritual Canticle*) this would not be true if they did not participate in God’s own grandeur, for in the sight of God nothing is precious but what He in Himself is.

What kind of death would I like to have? Well, I must live in that way.

We shall die as we live. So let us strive to reform what is deformed in our life, to live always ready to go the house of the Father.

Colloquy: Enter into conversation with St. Joseph, patron of a happy death (with Jesus and Mary at his side). Our Lady. Jesus. “*Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit.*”

Thereupon, I will give **thanks to God** our Lord for the gift of life. “*I thank you for the wonder of my being?*” (Ps 138)) “*I am wonderfully created!*” (cf. Ps 139:14) My life is a **gift**. I am the steward of this gift.

I shall also thank Him for this, that up to this very moment He has shown **Himself so loving and merciful to me**. I will ask the heavenly Father for the grace of a happy death, that I may amend my life to be ready to die at any moment, to go to the house of the Father.

Close with an *Our Father*.

