

# How To Have A Happy Death

By F. M. LEE, C.S.S.R.

Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1367a (1962)

Your Death.

Don't turn the page.

Don't run away because of those two words up there. You are only running into its arms. We all are.

There was one man who stayed and looked at death, listened to all it had to say, and, for the rest of his life, he never feared it again. Would you like that? Never to fear death again? Well, here is the way it happened for him.

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful queen. Her name was Isabella, and she was ever surrounded by brave, adoring courtiers. Beloved above all to this Queen was a handsome, young nobleman, whose name was Borgia. Francis Borgia. He loved his queen purely and deeply. He had laid his sword at her feet, and he hoped for long and happy years of honor and high position at her brilliant court.

But the queen died, as queens will, and she died very young, as some queens won't. The sad and broken Francis Borgia accompanied her funeral cortege in the long journey across the hot Spanish countryside to the city of Granada. Finally, they arrived at the palace, and a ponderous, legal-looking individual came out and declared that the casket must be opened to make sure it was really the queen inside.

Now, this was all before the days of our modern, clever embalming. And so, when the casket was opened, there was simply sheer horror. The stench, the pockmarked, decaying face, the sight of the milling vermin, struck the young courtiers like a nauseating flood. They groaned, they fled.

All except one. Francis Borgia stayed. There were sudden tears in his eyes, but they were not for the queen. They were the kind of tears that St. Paul must have shed as he rode out to persecute the Christians, and being suddenly struck from his horse by the Almighty, lay, crying there in the dust, a blinded man. But now, Francis is speaking to his queen for the last time.

"Oh Lady, you can take every hope that I ever had for honour and glory and put it beside you in that casket. I see now how death hovers like a shadow over all earthly beauty, mocking it, waiting to turn it into dust again. Farewell, my poor queen, I go to serve a Master Who can never die!"

And he went out to become one of the greatest Saints that God ever had. All because he had the courage to stand and look death full in the face. Let us.

After all, you know that the trees are already growing on the hillside, the trees that will someday cradle you against eternity. That not too pleasant picture — your own coffin. And yet, your pall-bearers are alive today, my friend. The machinery to carry you out of the land of the living is already in motion. Your own heartbeat of this very moment promises you there must be a last heartbeat some day. It cannot just go on. Your dear heart is your guarantee of death.

Shall we grow military for a moment, and plan our little campaign with death? Not against death, for we can never be victors there. We shall die. The curse of death is on us, and even the Son of God felt that curse of death on His cross. But plan our campaign we will, and the first line across our blueprint is bold and definite. It is this. Death will come.

Look at your watch for one minute. Do it. During that minute, about two thousand people died. At each second, another one stood before his God to hear the eternal decision, the final judgment on his life. All day, all night, they suddenly appear before Him, like endless millions of leaves, slipping quietly to the ground in the autumn of the year.

Up the polished marble steps goes Death, past the armed guards goes Death, to lay its cold irrevocable hand upon the most important shoulder in the world. And never has it been known to ask, "How ready — how rich — how old are you?"

We find ourselves uncomfortably remembering the beautiful, glossy-leafed, fig tree that our Lord one morning cursed until it shriveled before the eyes of the apostles. Uncomfortable, not because He cursed it, but because He cursed it for its barrenness, whereas no fig-tree in all Palestine was bearing fruit just then. It was not the season for fruit. Why curse a tree for barrenness in the early spring, when it was supposed to be barren? Why, except to warn us, who put off our complete conversion to God until the autumn of our lives — until we think it is time to turn to God. And find that our shriveled souls, cursed for unproductiveness, cannot turn in their clay sockets.

So we shall die. And the thought of it strikes us with the force of a feather landing on a pink cloud.

We have seen an hourglass. The glass with just enough opening for a grain of sand to pass through at its wasp-waist. The bottom and top are closed off, and exactly enough sand is put into the top as will take an hour to pass through the opening. When the hour is over, all the sand is on the bottom. It is no accident. That is all the sand there was.

And down a highway in Queensland, at seventy and eighty miles an hour, two automobiles are recklessly closing up the distance between each other. Four young people in each car, four young drunk people, and the sands of their lives are running out fast. Their clothes and their consciences are badly dishevelled, and in three minutes, they will stand before their Creator and give an account of their lives. Meanwhile, we shall be using acetylene torches to separate their poor bodies from the tangle of steel and glass. Death must have seemed so far away as they began that ride. The papers called it an accident. There was no accident. That was all the life they had been given, and it ran out.

If we could only get that picture clearly. The hourglass of our own lives. What is left in the top? How much? Three hours? The papers may call it an accident, but that was all the life that you had. Perhaps you will never get to a confessional again. Never to be absolved again. A blood clot, a stroke, a speeding car — God will get to you no matter where you are. Neither He nor you will add a grain of life. It was all settled before you were born, and it has been running through all these years. Have you an hour left? How many people live in mortal sin?

No longer are we drawing bold lines in our blueprint for the campaign with death. Very shaky lines, for death has all the advantage here. It can strike from behind. Forty thousand people will die tomorrow morning, and twenty-five thousand will not even see death coming. They will be as young as you, younger; as healthy as you, healthier; richer, poorer than you, and suddenly their

brain will be paralyzed in death and they will be dragged before the judgment seat of God to answer for it all. What if you are standing there with them? You could be, you know.

They are sitting in their homes tonight, quite alive.

Perhaps in a bad marriage.

Waiting for Easter. They will clean up then. Confession faithfully once a year with the whole year's load of sin.

By two o'clock tomorrow afternoon, their bodies will be waiting for identification at some morgue or other. To-night, they expect death exactly as much as you do. Death is for hospitals and battlefields, and for the old.

Christ died for us, loves us, and yet, because He must judge us, He was almost pleading when He said, "I will come to you like a thief in the night." As though: "If there is anyone you don't want Me to find you with, if there is any place, any home, any car wherein you don't want me to discover you, stay out of it! I promise you that I shall come as a thief! No sound, unexpected, unseen. When do you least expect Me, married man, when do you least want me? Single man? Woman? I have warned you. Don't gamble that I lie!"

If Adam and Eve had not committed their sin, we would not be thinking of death this way. There would be no death to think of. God never meant our souls and bodies to be torn apart in a last agony. Soul and body were meant to be one, as they are in you today. And so we are terrified at the thought of this unnatural separation. No friends return to tell us about another life, all is surrounded with mystery, darkness, fear.

And yet, our own personal, eventual heaven or hell is not a thing suddenly thrust upon us the day we die. There is really no mystery about it at all. If a man keeps crying out to God throughout his life, "I will not have you," then his fate will have the simplicity of an echo on the day he dies. God crying back, "And I will not have you!" Nobody builds for hell and lives in heaven; no one builds for heaven and finds himself in hell. On the very promise of the Almighty: "Man shall go into the house of his eternity." (Ecclesiastes 12:5.) Just as you build it today. So the sinner arranges two hells for himself. One on this earth, a mental hell, where he lives without peace of mind; one in eternity, where he lives without peace of mind or body. A two-time loser.

A priest raced through Melbourne in his car, pulled up at a hospital, and rushed for the bedside of his dying uncle. He was carrying the Blessed Sacrament, the holy oils. He came into a little vestibule, next to his uncle's room, and then, strangely enough, sat there for five hours until the man died. You see, his uncle had been living with a divorced woman for twelve years, and the woman was in the sickroom, and violently refused to let the priest enter. Long ago, that man had made his choice, and on this day, he would have to stay with it. The priest had brought his God as far as God would go, and now He waited, ten feet away. Waited for the man to die.

There is a line in the Scriptures, "I swear, as I am your God, I am not mocked." (See Galatians 6:7.)

There is a line in the Scriptures, "It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God!" (Hebrews 10:31.)

We watch human life, and it becomes a grim thought that these human beings shall die as they have lived. The thought can take practically all the comfort out of lying in bed on a Sunday morning, instead of going to Mass. And the bed can seem like a veritable nest of spikes when we realize the

compounded guilt of keeping the children away from the altar, away from the Communion railing. The brooding fear of what it might be like this Sunday morning, to fall into the hands of the living God, maliciously defied, deliberately angered.

And what of the person who has surrendered to some secret sin? He has made a contract with impurity, and death may break into the contract at any minute. All the while, his hope for heaven is just a mockery, a vague waiting for a vague someone who will decide for him whether he wants heaven or hell. In the heart of every sin, there is a dark core of unhappiness and its name is death. The soul, dead in sin, and the body ever in jeopardy. What if death had been waiting there, what if the last grain of sand had run out, and he had died as he was living?

These are the houses we build, and God has promised us that man shall go into the house of his eternity. As he built it. And the poor soul, who lives down all the years of her life with a concealed sin on her soul. (If only she knew the sheer happiness, the sense of humility, the desire to help ever so kindly, that wells up in the heart of any priest to whom she says, there in the confessional, "Father, I held something back years ago. Please help me.") Carrying the dead lumber in her heart, knowing only unhappy years now, and an eternity of payment when death shall find her out. Go, dear soul, go to any priest. By the grace of God, go today!

And sometimes, in the abandon of his reaping, death strikes at those who choose to ignore the responsibility that God has woven into the act of human love. They choose to ignore the child, choose an engineered sterility, or when mechanisms and chemistry fail, choose murder.

The lady stopped the missionary after the last Mass. He had never seen anyone so broken, so despairing, so fearful.

"Oh, Father, what shall I do? My husband and I have prevented children these twenty years. This morning, Father, he was dead. Beside me. Dead. Oh, what can we do?" "Pray, pray".

Would it have done her and her husband any good to have looked upon the decaying face of Isabella, the queen? I doubt it. They would have simply come to know what death looked like. The courtiers, who fled from the casket of their queen, knew what death looked like. They knew, and they tore it out of their memories as they stumbled back to a life of pleasure. Knowing is not enough, so God said, "Remember, remember your last end, and then, you shall never sin." (See Ecclesiasticus 7:40.) That is why you find a skull, a death's head, somewhere in the portrait of the old saints. They were always remembering what death could do to them. They could not stop its invasion of their body, but their whole life was geared to make sure that death would never touch their soul.

Human love is blind. (In much the same order, so is chemical attraction.) One man had about five minutes to live, and the priest begged him to renounce the unlawful wife who stood at his death-bed. Love her, yes – but not as his so-called 'wife'. But the gentleman rose up in his bed to cry out, "I'll not tell her to go, I'll tell her that I love her and will love her in hell." And the life blood came pouring out of his mouth. Dead.

In hell he would love her! No! In hell he would hate and curse her for all eternity as the cause of his own endless agony. There is no love in hell. The peace of mind that you have never known in your bad marriage will not be waiting for you in hell. Aren't you human enough to want happiness and peace somewhere along the line? Dreamer, you haven't it today, and you have made sure you will never have it throughout the eternities.

But perhaps you have grown used to sin. Are you glad, at last? You may find another nugget of comfort in knowing that, quite often, a bad conscience does not trouble folks, even on their deathbed. You can kill off your conscience. One man did, and as he was dying, Cardinal (Saint) Bellarmine leaned over him to suggest an act of contrition. The man looked up at him.

“Father, what is contrition?” He had five minutes in which to tell God that he was sorry for a lifetime of sin, and he did not even remember what sorrow meant.

As a missionary, one often enough meets people who are quite pleasant and blithe about living in sin. It is the nearest, known thing to the peace and beauty of a sepulchre. Christ acidly called it, “clean without, whitewashed, and the corruption of bones within.” (See Matthew 23:27.) One, the prince of the fallen angels, hopes they stay pleasant and blithe. he will never bother them, even on a deathbed. Why should he? They are in his pocket, and there is no struggle. Why take the case to court and argue further? He has the deed, signed, sealed, and delivered. Don’t envy them.

For, there is a sentence in Holy Scripture that holds what is about the most dangerous, final, shocking truth that has to do with us creatures of God. It is this: “Seek the Lord, while He may yet be found.” (Isaiah 55:6.) While He may yet be found. So there can come a day when He can’t be found. So, there are people walking about the streets of our cities, and they are already condemned to hell. They will step from this life into hell forever. Their last chance, their last grace, was turned down, and God will never bother them again. There is a peaceful death for you!

Because you have cared enough to follow these thoughts upon your death, this reading can be all the grace you will ever need. It may be your last, but it is enough, if it will lead you quickly to the confessional, or at least, for this moment, to kneel and make a fervent act of contrition. Start the road back... Do that, remembering that on one of these todays, you will look for the first time into the eyes of Jesus Christ.

Bravely look now, and say your act of sorrow deeply, lovingly, to Him.

Mercy is marvellous.

Perhaps, on the other hand, you are the one who has made plans for your deathbed. You will come back then. You will give up sin only when you no longer have the strength to commit it. You will snap your fingers, and God will come running. And the poor fool of a God, who demands that we intend to give up sin, will listen anxiously while you admit your transgressions, while you throw him the dregs of your life, and the sop of amendment forced on you by physical sickness!

Have you ever been really ill? So in pain that you cried to die? There lies such a one now, and his mind is growing dim. The pain quiets a bit, and a new anguish arises as he wonders who will take care of his broken wife and children. He wants to rise and protect them, but the sickness has taken the last ounce of his strength. He has never tried to conquer his flesh, and now he has fallen again and again. He is half crazed at the thought of the eternal hell before him. The terrible thing called despair is rising in the depths of his being. He is sick, heart-broken, his will weakened, and now — suddenly he is going to rise up and make a good confession of his whole life, his every bad action all those years; his strength will miraculously return, his mind will clear... It won’t. He spent a lifetime putting a different kind of machinery into motion, and now it moves heartlessly on to his destruction.

Mercy is marvellous, and he made a mockery of it, and his fate already lies across the Scriptures, “I swear, as I am your God, I am not mocked!” And this is mockery.

Oh, your priest will run to the bedside with everything the Church has. And your priest will come home to sit in his room, and stare awhile at the wall, and wonder — what kind of sorrow was that — what kind of amendment was that — what kind of consciousness was that?

A few days later, the priest will bury that man in consecrated ground, and perhaps wonder where God has really buried his soul.

Too cruel? Oh no. St. Jerome is there to remind us that in all the Scriptures, only one man ever came back to God at the end of his life — the good thief. Just one. One, so we would not despair. But only one, lest we are thinking of trying it ourselves.

But ask the One, Who hung next to the good thief, and poured out His mercy that afternoon.

“Yes, the good thief. He came up out of a childhood of poverty and fear; he came to Me out of his years of ignorance and oppression. He came to Me at the end of the chase. I gave him one chance, and he took it.”

“And you?” So many years, so many chances, so much mercy.

All the Christian world turns to its God on the cross. Look up confidently, for This is the One Who forgave His murderers.

All of us.

Time Is for Eternity.

THE YOUNG virgins have formed a group, now, in the Roman arena. Except for their clothing, they are very much like the senior high school girls, who are shining up that graduation ring every conscious and every unconscious moment, with happy eyes set on the great day in June, their graduation day. But there are no rings, and there will not be any great day in June for the young virgins here in the arena. They were quietly living along their Christian lives, when suddenly time ran out - time for living their Christian faith ran out. Now they have to die for it. Their faith is no different than the faith of the young high school girls in your parish, but now these young Roman girls must die for it.

Thousands of eyes will watch them die, Emperor Domitian among them. The people are already there, sitting forward rather eagerly, actual human beings, who have come out to see other, cornered human beings, actually eager with the lust of blood.

And the animals, the other animals, the ones they keep in the cages around the arena enclosure, are watching, too. Starved for two weeks now, but soon they can sink their jaws into this delicate, living human flesh, and the little girls will be quite defenseless against the tearing, drooling jaws. God help them quickly be unconscious.

Of course, they do not have to die. If they just take a bit of incense, and burn it before that marble god, and deny the name of the Jesus who died fifty years ago over in Jerusalem, they will be as free as birds.

Rosalia is among the virgins. Rosalia, so made for youth and life and love. Maybe God will have some strong Roman soldier die for her. Or, maybe it is lawful to burn a little incense, because her father just did. Her father has gone over to the pagans. And see, the young girl on the edge of the group, she is leaving them, she is accepting the incense... she is burning it before the god of marble. Surely, now. Surely, now, it is all right to go along and burn a little incense. Except... that this is

HER eternal happiness waiting out there on the arena sands, and there never can be anyone to walk out there and bring it back to her. Eternal happiness is out THERE, Rosalia, so walk out... look up at your Christ... He knows the fears, the human tears, walking, walking... Youth and life and love are sweet, Rosalia, but just keep walking... Oh, Christ, take her quickly. Eternal youth, eternal life, eternal love.

New Year's Eve. Old Year's twilight.

We get to try it again.

Or did we try it at all last year? What was it? Incense before which gods? Time ran out on that one Friday, time for just passively being a Catholic ran out, and you had to take a stand on denying yourself meat at that banquet. You ate the meat, you, the strong man, and the little girls in the Roman arena turned themselves into torn, bloody meat for Christ. We, the living, get to try it again. We get a new year, in which to live our faith. The little girls had to die for it. It is the same faith. We are the underlings. [At the time of writing, Catholics were under a serious obligation to deny themselves meat on a Friday in remembrance of Our Lord's Passion and Death. Now, the obligation is to perform some additional sacrifice on every Friday.]

George Eastman, the creator of the Kodak empire, sat in his penthouse, atop the Chicago skyscraper. His left hand rested on a series of buttons, electrical buzzers that could demand and produce from the outside world anything and every-thing to delight the heart of man. But Eastman's left hand was very cold, and Eastman was very dead, and Eastman's right hand held all the story, his own revolver. Before he took his life, he wrote a little note, a curt little autobiography, a piteous paraphrasing of something Christ had said. The note ran: "I have had everything that life has to offer. Life has no more to offer, so I want no more life."

Christ had said, "For what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul? Or what exchange shall a man give for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26.)

In the twilight of the Old Year, we think of trying it again. And we gaze up from this reading to find Christ there, in the shadows. Christ with His scales, to weigh the conduct of our life against His indestructible words, "What does it profit?" Wherein is the profit, to lie awake at night, hoping not to die before dawn, to die in one's sins? Wherein is the profit to have throttled off conscience, so that, in a blind bravado, we do not care if we die before the dawn? How went the exchange, when we traded out our peace of mind? How went the bargain, when we traded out our soul? Who, then, owns that soul tonight? And would that one take its place in hell? Who would? Who can?

If only you could really die away into nothingness. Then, it might be a trifling thing to hide behind the veils of marriage and turn love into a deliberately unfruitful lust. If only the children did not have to go on forever, if only they were not immortal, then it might be a trifling thing for triflers to deny them the poor, short span of human life. If only it were a trifling thing to walk today without peace of mind, and to lie down tonight, condemned forever. If only you did not have to go on forever. If you did not have to be alive somewhere a million years from tonight, and still go on paying, paying, paying...

For a sin that could have been forgiven in two minutes in the quiet of a confessional and a burst of burning sorrow.

Here, in the last shadows of the Old Year's twilight, let me study my profit.

So many things seem profitable, so many promise happiness. Throughout the day, we seem to drive on from one little gain to another. A bit more comfort realized. A taste sated, a thirst. Some work passed off to another. A compliment attained and laved in. A thousand little creature things, burning up our time and talent and energy, promising us happiness. Taking up all our day, and all our days, until they have all our life, and yet none of them seems to mention any happiness for the day after we die. They never talk about that. Only God can. Only God can dare mention the day after we die. Only God can talk about the sheer profit of eternal happiness. All the way back to the catechism, then. Know Me, love Me, and serve Me, and I shall so drown you in love and happiness for all eternity that you shall forget the tiny inch of time, the tiny inch of suffering on earth, when you won these endless centuries of bliss.

Here in the quiet, before the world gets at me again, and fools me again, let me plan my happiness. I was born to be happy, and only sin can make me sad. Only sin is sad. Sin is the only sorrow, because it, alone, cannot be turned into joy. Poverty and sickness and heartbreak and bereavement and loneliness are sorrows, but they all can be turned into joy. For Christ and Mary were all those things, poor and lonely, heart-broken and bereaved, and I, so poor and sick and ungifted upon the human scene, can have the quiet happiness of Christ and Mary, if only I do not tear God and His peace out of my heart.

But how about February, and March, and the time to come? Will I still feel this way? Will I still be working at this kind of happiness? I work all year so I can take two weeks off for vacation, and now I am asking myself if I will work at my faith a couple more years so I can take eternity off.

Another thing that worries me. Everybody in hell wanted to go to heaven. Nobody wants to go to hell. Just what happened? Maybe they thought that some priest or nun or mother or angel was standing behind them, and would take care of all that for them. Nobody is worrying about me tonight. Nobody... Nobody. And the people in hell wanted to go to heaven just as I do. They just didn't do anything about it. They wanted something else more than heaven, and it turned out to be hell.

The train was an hour out of Melbourne. The litter, human and otherwise, of long travel, lay strewn about the lounge car. We had formed a little *tete-a-tete* group in one corner of the car. To while away the time, we agreed that each should suggest what he thought the best mental attitude for the next twenty-four hours, if we knew that an atom bomb would destroy us all at the end of that time. Our discussion never got beyond the young man who led off. With a self-assured, sophisticated smile, he flattened us all by this solution:

"I'll worry about tomorrow when it comes."

At first blush, and last blush, a quite insane answer. Here, we had agreed that we were all to be bombed out of existence the next day, and still, our young hold-out planned to play in the clay of this world till it blew up in his face. What made it worse was his obvious intention to wallow in a series of actions, lustful, avaricious, drunkard, which he had earlier boasted of upon his arrival in Sydney.

But are we less foolish? Who promised that poor sensual side of us even twenty-four hours, and yet, perhaps we still put off the conquering of temptations till some tomorrow. When will we face the fact that heaven is not a gift, but a reward for **DOING** something? God had to test us somehow, and He decided to leave it up to our body, as to whether the soul would go to hell or not. Cry as we will about being weak, that will not change the facts. There is a test going on. We all want to go to



heaven, but we will end up wherever the body drags us to, the heights of heaven, or the rocks of hell.

And who promised that selfish side of us twenty-four hours in which to grow unselfish? Nobody will ever need a prayer more than the selfish. Nobody. Their design for living is 'me first'. The grammar is bad, but the tragedy is fatally worse. Their Poisonous attitude reaches out into every action, every decision. Always Planning ahead to have everything come out their way. Always wringing out the last drop of satisfaction from every situation. Their lives are a living denial of, a perpetual challenge to, the most basic platform of Christ's doctrine, Christ's blueprint for ever getting to heaven, namely, taking up the cross and denying oneself. How well and how long such a one had better sit in the Old Year twilight, and swear to himself that he shall become selfish for his soul, even as he had been selfish for his body, for his will, for his way. It is a task for giants, or for a weakling with God at his arm.

Of course, there is no tomorrow. There is just a series of todays. On one of those todays, you die.

If only we would live our 'today' as God wants. Then we would find ourselves in agreement with Our Lord's words: "Be not therefore solicitous for tomorrow; for the morrow will be solicitous for itself. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof." (Matthew 6:34.) Death would have lost its terror and sting. We would belong to Christ and we would be living for HIM!

It is late now. The New Year will soon break from out the shadows. The young virgins, the millionaire Eastman, the lad on the train, have all told their stories. And someday your story will be told. In a few years, death will have claimed most of us who read these lines, and people will begin to forget how we looked, how we talked, how we laughed. The inevitable wall will rise up between the living and the dead, between the living and you, the dead. Your wife, your husband, your children must begin calculating how to live without you. They loved you, indeed, but you are out of their plans now. The story never changes. Your own last will, the laws of your state, will take away every penny you had. And you worked all your life for that. Just what did you save for yourself? For YOU?

When it is all over, and the seasons have laughed and wept and sported about the fields above your grave for many a year, what if someone could come upon that last cradle of your body, find that casket, and reach in to take up the handful of dust that was you? Will you care? Will you laugh, as you look over God's shoulder, and then be swept away into the delightful social calendar of the courts of heaven? Will you care about dust when you have God? Or shall it be a cruelly valuable handful of dust? And will you look up a moment from the infinite torture of hell, to know that a flurry of wind has just caught up and spun to the four corners of the earth the priceless handful of dust, once your body? Gone, into nothingness, and you must go on, paying for that, for all eternity. How was the gain? How the profit? Remember, too, the Last Day, and the resurrection of that same body to... What? Eternal glory? Or Eternal damnation?

Oh man, look long into the twilight shadows, until you see gazing back at you the burnt, shocked, hopeless eyes of someone who once lived exactly as you are living tonight, of someone in hell, who gambled on a tomorrow, and lost. Ask him what he would give for five minutes back on earth. Ask him what he would do. You have the five minutes. Remember, you could have spent them on your knees. You could have thanked God for letting you live long enough to be making the greatest act of sorrow in your life. It could mean eternal happiness, no matter what has happened in the past. Five minutes. Remember, you are responsible for them. You will know it eternally.

If, tonight, with all authority, you could find your way into hell, and tell some poor damned soul that he is to be freed in fifty years, he might well cry out: “Fifty years! If your message is true, I don’t care if it is fifty-million years. So long as this will end. Do you know the very hell of hell? It is to be without a reason for counting the days and years. There is no calendar in hell. It just goes on. But now I shall count again! Fifty years, and then eternity will be just beginning!”

But no such messenger will ever find his way into hell. They can all forget how to count. No wonder that the terrible word “eternity” has sent legions of the most brilliant, gifted minds and personalities into monastic cells, despising as dirt whatever the world had to offer, and fearfully readying their souls and accounts for the crack of doom.

And now the New Year is trembling at the threshold. Fifty years! Will you count them as a Catholic, walking out in the New Year to your obligations, to your duties, to your prayer and kindness and love? Will you take your place with the lion-hearted young girls, those other Christians in the Roman arena, who believed as you do tonight, and went out to die for it? And at the end, eternity will just be beginning!

You have the greatest gift in the world tonight — you are alive. Perhaps you can write “failure” behind everything you ever tried. Perhaps you are alone in some rented room and nobody knows or cares whether you go on living or not. Maybe the Catholic solution to some problem in your single or married life seems to have beaten you down into the dust, and you crawl and choke and weep and hate the falseness of your position. Or maybe, from your sickbed, life seems a foul, obscene, pitiless joke.

But you are alive tonight, and you can still have it all! Eternal youth, eternal life, eternal love! God made you for it. Reach for it. It is all that anyone will ever need, and you can still have it all. Walk out and clasp it with fingers of steel, and never let it go!

And a Happy New Year! Millions of them, eternally yours!

St. Joseph, Patron of a Happy Death,

Pray for us.

---