

EMBRACING SISTER DEATH

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Praised by You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape. —*Francis of Assisi* [Francis of Assisi, “The Canticle of the Creatures” 12, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, and William Short (New York, NY: New City Press, 1999-2001), 114. Further citations of this source will be noted as *FAED* followed by the page number.]

For many of us, death is our worst fear, while others ignore its existence completely. Still others exploit death for entertainment through television, film, and news media, attracting the curious and bored, desensitizing the viewer to the reality of mortality. However, because Christians maintain eschatological hope of life after death, the inevitability of death should not pose the fear and anxiety it so often evokes. Making the move from unhealthy fear of death to authentic Christian hope is a lesson that each believer must learn, a lifelong process of conversion and peacemaking. Such was the experience of Francis of Assisi during the thirteenth century—early in his life, like most of us, he feared death for its threat to his continued happiness and worldly engagement, but by the end of his life, Francis had made peace with his own mortality, going so far as to call death his “sister.”

Francis’s understanding of death within the context of God’s creation was a capstone discovery that completed a lifelong process of conversion and seeking God. And at the center of his ability to make peace with his own mortality was his fraternal worldview of creation.

Francis of Assisi and Death

From the beginning of his life until close to his death, Francis, like most people, appears to have dealt with the reality of death largely through avoidance and exploitation. This response was rooted in his fear of death. Sometime between 1209 and 1215, when Francis was in his early thirties, he writes, “And you think that you will possess this world’s vanities for a long time, but you are deceived because a day and an hour will come of which you give no thought, which you do not know, and of which you are unaware when the body becomes weak, death approaches, and it dies a bitter death.” [Francis of Assisi, “Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance” 2:14, in *FAED*, 43.] This fearful tone is echoed in his *Later Exhortation* where he writes, “But let everyone know that whenever and however someone dies in mortal sin without making amends when he could have [done so] and did not, the devil snatches his soul from his body with such anguish and distress that no one can know [what it is like] except the one experiencing it.” [Francis of Assisi, “Later Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance,” 82, in *FAED*, 51.] These are but two examples of Francis’s early thoughts on death. Although the language is spiritualized and denotes a certain religiosity, the underlying attitude toward death is strictly negative. There are two themes that come across strongly in these early writings

of Francis, namely, the inevitability of death and that death is both painful and to be feared. The first theme is of little note, as all who reflect on death come to this conclusion, but the second theme is highly problematic.

Death, as understood within the context of these early texts, is devoid of a hopeful or purposeful connection to the divine or to something beyond human finitude. Instead, Francis seems to link death to punishment for sinfulness and to portray death as a condition of human creatureliness. Additionally, during this period Francis interprets death as the threat of annihilation, the negation of existence. Although this view of death does not necessarily fit the contemporary models of avoidance and exploitation, it does indicate an uneasiness with the very subject that Francis acknowledges as inevitable. If this is where his view of death had remained, Francis would have joined the ranks of those who, in the face of the fear and anxiety of inescapability, never see death as anything beyond the natural end to finite existence. However, Francis's view of death does not continue on a static trajectory; it develops and matures over the course of his life.

At the end of his life, as Francis drew near to the death that he feared for so long, the tone of his expression of death changed noticeably. Along his journey of life, prayer, and ministry, Francis remained convinced of death's inevitability, but he started to view its meaning and his relationship to death rather differently. Where once he saw death as painful, as something to be feared, he now dared to call death his "sister."

Francis's salutation to Sister Death is found in verse twelve of his fourteen-verse *Canticle of the Creatures*. It reads, "Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape." The canticle was constructed in three stages, over several years. The first part (vv 1-9) is the earliest section, which highlights six natural elements from the sun and moon to wind, fire, and earth. Each of these natural elements is addressed as brother or sister. Each is named both in relation to Francis (or the reader) and as a part of God's creation. There is a fraternal and filial connection expressed that links all of creation to Francis and both creation and Francis to God. It is also through creation that Francis sees God made present, and it is likewise through creation that Francis wishes to praise God. The second section of the canticle (vv 10 and 11) speaks to the need for reconciliation, solidarity, and peace. This stanza was written in response to a power struggle that was taking place in the medieval town of Assisi between the mayor and the bishop. Francis served as mediator, and he wrote this section of the text to prayerfully address the conflict and inspire a resolution. The concluding section (vv 12-14), which contains the line about Sister Bodily Death, was composed on Francis's deathbed.

The transformation from fear of death to a place where Francis—awaiting his own impending death—could welcome death as "sister" is clarified by looking to the threefold construction of the canticle, which illustrates Francis's process of learning to embrace

death. The first section of the canticle in many ways summarizes what I have referred to as Francis's fraternal worldview. What we find in the first nine verses is not a flowery poem or simple artistic expression, but an invitation for us to join him in the hymn of praise to God, a hymn that is rooted in our fellowship with all of creation. Human beings, like the sun, moon, and earth, are created by God and are brought into existence through God's own gift of love. Transformation from avoidance and exploitation of death to a welcomed embrace must begin with a realization that we are connected to all of creation in an intrinsic, holy way.

The second section of the canticle naturally builds upon the foundation that is laid in the first section. Reconciliation and peace can only be found where there is authentic relationship. The relationship that Francis identified as shared among all of creation is sometimes referred to as kinship or fraternity. It is a relationship that extends beyond dominance, control, or even stewardship. Francis's fraternal worldview situated his own life within the natural order of creation, in which he saw the intrinsic dignity of being created by God. This dignity is present in all of life, including the lives of other men and women and the life of the world.

Recognizing the dignity of all life should compel us to see beyond our own needs and desires, our own fears and anxiety, to appreciate the connectedness that calls us to support one another and care for all creation. Thus peacemaking does not become an activity that one does out of kindness or sympathy, but becomes a mode of acting that is part and parcel of what it means to be a follower of Christ and a believer in the God who is love. When Francis composed the section on peacemaking for the dueling mayor and bishop, he said, "Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love, and bear infirmity and tribulation. Blessed are those who endure in peace for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned." [Francis of Assisi, "The Canticle of the Creatures" 10-11, in *FAED*, 114.] He was reminding them (and us) that God is glorified when we enter into right relationship with each other, our selves, and our world. The recognition of that right relationship challenges us to move beyond our desire to avoid or exploit those parts of our lives that frighten us. Then, not only do we see our rightful place among the rest of creation, but we see that our life does not end only in death.

It is through peacemaking and self-emptying that we return to our place as children of God and brothers and sisters to one another and the rest of creation. In doing so, we no longer see death as something alien and to be feared, but as another dimension of ourselves. This is what is meant by the notion of facing our own death, of radically encountering that constitutive part of ourselves that cannot be avoided, or as Francis says, "[that] from whom no one living can escape." Death is always before us and always a part of us, much like we remain always connected to the rest of creation and to one another. Death maintains its fearful place as a threat to those who refuse to see themselves as intimately connected to that which is other and to that which is wholly (and Holy) Other. For Francis, abandoning the belief that we are isolated individuals—entitled

to and deserving of more than others—allows us to share in the experience of connectedness to and dependence on God. And that recognition of God’s presence in our lives is the beginning of the hope that arises from the fraternal worldview of Francis in the face of death.

In addition to seeing God’s presence and work in the world, Francis never forgot the central truth of the Christian message, which is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of the resurrection, death is no longer the absolute end of life. Rather, although death remains a mystery that can only be fully understood through personal experience, Francis’s transformative view of death paints death as a source of hope. Francis saw, through his connectedness to creation and his relationship to God through all of creation, that death was a natural part of God’s plan for humanity. Yes, death is inescapable, but it does not mark an end as much as it marks the liminal experience of a new beginning.

This is the hope that transcends the worldly limits of our finite experience. As Doyle notes, “By calling death his sister, Francis is reminding us that the Christian faith has a sacred message about human death.” [Doyle, *St. Francis and the Song of Brotherhood and Sisterhood*, 176.] The challenge that lies before us is to embrace this vision of death and to believe that life has been radically altered and redeemed through the resurrection.

As he approached his own earthly end, Francis, recalling the love of God made manifest in the gift of creation, looked forward with hope to his share in the resurrection of Christ. There was no longer a need to avoid or exploit death, because death was his sister, closer to him than the fear of the unknown. With arms extended, Francis did not cower from his destiny in fear and anxiety but embraced his sister bodily death with his whole heart and left this world in peace.

Conclusion

Living in light of a fraternal worldview that honors the connectedness of all creation helps to free us from the fear of death which otherwise mitigates the fullness of life and influences our actions toward self-preservation and selfishness at the cost of authentic relationship. The transformation from fear to hope in the life of Francis of Assisi as he approached death provides us with a model for Christian living in an increasingly secular, violent, and pessimistic world. In welcoming death as our sister, we might serve as beacons of the Christian hope of new life and live the prophetic call of the Gospel, proclaiming “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).