

“So far as I have observed persons nearing the end of life, the Roman Catholics understand the business of dying better than Protestants. They have an expert by them, armed with spiritual specifics, in which they both, patient and priestly ministrant, place implicit trust. Confession, the Eucharist, Extreme Unction, these all inspire a confidence, which, without this symbolism, is too apt to be wanting in over sensitive natures... I have seen a good many Roman Catholics on their dying beds; and it has always appeared to me that they accept the inevitable with a composure which showed that their belief, whether or not the best to live by, was a better one to die by” (*Over the Teacups* [1891]).

We will go to Christ, the Giver of Life, and ask Him for the life that never ends, life everlasting. Pray for a happy death; pray for those who have already died. We will accept death from God wherever, whenever, and however He decides. That is one of the best prayers and penances we can offer to the Almighty.

Above all we will occasionally bring home to ourselves the vital, sobering, balancing thought that we must die, but that we will rise again, with Christ whom we have tried to love and serve. Let the dance of death go on. We, the followers of Christ are ready.

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The Danse Macabre (Dance of Death)

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Throughout the Middle Ages the idea of man's mortality was frequently treated in art and literature; in the fifteenth century it became almost the dominant theme. In one form in particular, that of the Dance of Death; it engrossed the attention of painters and poets in Western Europe. A procession of mortals, arranged in hierarchical order, filed past the specter of Death, who summoned each in turn to the dance. The allegorical meaning of the pictures and poems that represent this idea is perfectly clear: the power of Death and the equality of all men before him is expressed in unequivocal language.

One illustration of this subject was a famous painting by Bernt Notke (1440-1509) "The Dance of Death," (1463) which hung in the courthouse in Lubeck, Germany. The painting was destroyed during WWII, but apparently Notke had made two versions of the painting and therefore in Tallinn, Estonia, one may still see one of the original works attributed to him and read part of the original text.

The painting was 30 meters wide (about 100 ft) and depicted the specter of Death as

he skipped in and out of a procession of 24 people, calling the people to the dance, but most of them try to refuse him. There are people of all classes and ages, rich and poor, young and old, children, men and women, all dancing and laughing gaily. The participants do not appear in a random order but follow a strict hierarchical sequence - starting with the pope, who as God's substitute is the mightiest mortal, and finishing with the tender infant. The dancers are alternating representations of ecclesiastical and secular society. In their midst stalks Death, with a scythe, cutting down first this one, next that one. One victim is a small child, another an old man, here a youth, there a middle-aged woman. The dance goes on and the dancers take little or no notice of the specter of death in their midst.

Similar dances of death were painted, sometimes carved, on the outside walls of cloisters, or family vaults, of ossuaries or inside churches. These frescoes represent an emaciated corpse or a skeleton coupled with a representative of a certain social class. The number of characters and the composition of the dance vary. The dance of death often takes the form of a lively chain-dance. Below or above the picture are painted verses by which death addresses his victim. He often talks in a threatening or accusing tone, sometimes he is cynical or sarcastic. Then comes the argument of the person, full of remorse and despair, begging for mercy. But death leads everyone into the dance. Death does not care for the social position, or for the gender, or age of the people it leads into its dance. It is often represented

with a musical instrument. This characteristic has a symbolic significance and appears at the beginning of the dance of death. The instrument evokes the tempting, even diabolic enchanting power of music. Death charms mankind with its music.

Daily we see Death angel prowling among us, cutting down one after another. We do not know when, we do not know where, we do not know how, but we do know that he will come for each one of us. He is very democratic, as he slights no one, or forgets anyone. The dance of death is a reminder that even the mightiest man and the fairest maiden may in short time become a banquet for maggots.

The only certain thing in life is that life will end. Death is certain. Every day brings proof that you and I will die. Walking among us in the daily dance of life, death gives no announcement of his coming.

People die everywhere, in bed, on the street, in hospitals, and in their easy chairs. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, we watched as some of our nations finest poured out their life blood into the desert sands of a far off country, in the name of freedom for an oppressed people.

People die at every age of life. Young as well as old, babies as well as grandparents, healthy as well as sick, no year of life is spared. If you want striking proof of this, read the obituary notices in some large city newspaper.

Death may come in a highway crash, or from disease. It may come from an airplane dropping from the sky, or from a tiny virus invisible to the naked eye. Death may come after a slow and lingering illness, or it may

come with the suddenness of a heart attack or a drive-by shooting. It may come peacefully or painfully, announced or unannounced. But Death inexorably comes to each. He comes every day to tens of thousands of people. As I write this sentence a great number of people are dying somewhere, somehow.

Death, then, is a fact. In reality, it is the only fact of life. It is not always a happy or cheerful thought. Nevertheless, we must face it bravely and intelligently. We talk of death, we think of death, not with the idea of frightening ourselves, not with any morbid idea of looking at something gloomy just for the sake of being gloomy. No, we face it as we want to face all facts and realities. Knowing approximately when we are going to die is a gift. We have, if needed, time to right our wrongs, to forgive those who have hurt us, to leave behind our memoirs, to tell our family and friends we love them, and most importantly to reconcile ourselves with God.

St. Augustine wrote, "If we celebrate birth, we should celebrate death." Death is the door to everlasting life, in which we express our belief. Death is also the prelude to the resurrection of the body, in which we also believe. Incidentally, only those who believe in the resurrection of the body, have a sensible, reasonable view regarding death. How terrible death must be to one who thinks that it ends all! How bitter to those left behind!

It was Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, the distinguished Boston physician and father of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Justice of the United States Supreme Court who wrote: