

***On Christian Dying: Classic and Contemporary Texts*, by Matthew Levering, ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. 160 pp. Index.**

***Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well*, by Christopher P. Vogt. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004. 172 pp. Bibliography. Index.**

The ethics of death and dying have been the subject of many recent public debates in both the church and the secular arena. While these two books do not enter these debates directly, they help to clarify the foundations of a Christian approach to issues of death and dying.

On Christian Dying is a collection of sixteen texts which discuss both the nature of death and how to die well. Levering opens the work with an introductory essay in which he gleans wisdom from philosophers and poets on the meaning of death. He uses works such as Plato's *Phaedo*, and the writings of Walker Percy, T. S. Eliot, and Fyodor Dostoevsky to introduce prominent themes of Christian dying: detachment from self, self-giving love, and living a cruciform life. These themes regarding death and dying are present throughout the Christian tradition. Thus, Levering notes that by attending to the narratives and reflections on death by the saints, contemporary Christians learn to model their lives and deaths on the witness of those holy persons who have gone before them.

Levering's purpose in editing this collection is to explore the ways in which Christian "saints" (broadly speaking) have discussed and approached the topic of death. The collection includes, among others, excerpts from the writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch,

St. Polycarp of Smyrna, the martyrs of Gaul, St. Athanasius, and St. Ambrose; from St. Augustine's *Confessions* and St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*; and from the writings of St. Thomas More, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Catherine of Genoa, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, St. Joseph Cafasso, John Henry Newman, and St. Thérèse of Lisieux. The texts are arranged chronologically, giving the reader a sense of the development of the Christian tradition of death and dying from the early church until the late nineteenth century.

At the end of each text, Levering includes a list of two or three questions on the saint for reflection. After the passage from Ignatius of Antioch he asks, for example, "Why does Ignatius ask the members of the Church of Rome not to petition on his behalf?" After an excerpt from Thomas More's letter to his daughter, Levering advises us to "Meditate upon [More's] trust in God's providential will. Why does he trust even though he knows he may soon be put to death?" The questions are more pastoral than academic.

The central theme of the book is that the dying teach the living how to live by modeling self-giving. This theme is present in the accounts not only of the martyrs, but of other saints, like Catherine of Siena, as well. Her detachment from self opens her to true humility and pure agapic love. This, according to Levering, is the cruciform life. It is the life of dying to self, in the imitation of Jesus, in order that one may truly live.

Also working within the Christian tradition is Christopher Vogt's *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well*. Vogt finds the contemporary approach to death to be misplaced, with its

understanding of death as “to be avoided at all costs,” the inordinate focus on how medical professionals are to respond to the dying person, and the relative inattention afforded to the patient who is dying. Vogt also notes that the contemporary experience of death and dying in the United States calls for renewed reflection. This is due to, among other things, the drop in communicable diseases (which kill quickly), the rise of chronic disease (such as heart disease and cancer, which kill more slowly), and innovation in medical technology, which not only prolongs dying but also blurs the distinction between those who are dying and those who have a chance for recovery.

In the first two chapters, Vogt presents rich sources of reflection Christian virtue ethics, in particular, as expressed in the *ars moriendi* tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From this tradition Vogt explores the works of Desiderius Erasmus, William Perkins, Robert Bellarmine, S.J., and Jeremy Taylor. These thinkers maintained that preparation for death was a life-long project. One could not hope to die well through a movement of the will; rather, one needed to cultivate certain virtues throughout one’s life so that one could die a good death. In recovering this tradition, Vogt proposes that the best *ars moriendi* is the *ars vivendi* of the Christian virtues. Drawing on the tradition, he proposes three virtues as essential to this end: patience, compassion, and hope.

In Chapter Three, Vogt develops the virtue of compassion. He contrasts the Christian notion of compassion with a prominent contemporary secular notion represented in the writings of physician Timothy Quill. Physician-assisted suicide (PAS) is used to highlight the differences in the two approaches. Quill grounds his support for PAS in an understanding of compassion as “non-abandonment of the suffering patient.” Non-abandonment not only includes remaining with the suffering patient, but also includes doing whatever is needed to alleviate the patient’s suffering. Thus, Quill argues that if death is the only means by which a patient is able to escape suffering, a compassionate doctor

(i.e., one who does not abandon her or his patients) is obliged to facilitate the dying process. Vogt rejects Quill’s conclusion because compassion exists in a web of virtues—namely, patience and hope—which guide the patient to patiently bear his suffering with others and to hope that his suffering is, in some way, redemptive and meaningful.

Chapter Four presents a biblical *ars moriendi*, focusing on the Jesus of Luke’s Gospel as the archetype of the three virtues. Vogt chooses the Jesus of Luke because Luke’s Jesus is intended to be a model for dying Christians to emulate. Vogt underscores that in life and in death Jesus shares his autonomy with God; therefore, He must surrender control of his life and death to God, and patiently await his fate. In this vein Vogt writes:

we must wait for events to unfold for God’s will or purposes to be made known to us. Jesus’s wait is not long lived in the garden, but waiting is part of the narrative; Jesus does not make a decision in favor of obedience to God and then run to the authorities to precipitate his death, but waits for them to come and arrest him. (105)

Vogt notes that in Jesus, compassion is given a new dimension; compassion from the one who is dying to others who are also suffering. Thus, to die well is not only to receive compassion, but also to express it.

Vogt concludes the book by proposing an *ars moriendi* for our own time. Here special emphasis is given to that increasingly rare virtue, patience. Vogt proposes a practice, lay ministry to the dying, as an example of how to inculcate these three virtues into the lives of ordinary Christians. This ministry would reintegrate dying into the life of the community and thereby provide a moment of compassionate service to the dying and also a moment for community members to reflect on their own deaths.

While it is difficult to compare and contrast works from different genres, it is possible to draw a general sketch for comparative purposes. Both of these works—Levering’s and Vogt’s—mine the Christian

tradition for insight into dying well today. They concur that a good death is the fruit of a life well lived. In addition, both works succeed in refocusing the conversations surrounding death and dying, from how medical professionals are to treat dying patients to the quality of the death of the patient. Still, there are distinct differences in emphasis. Levering's collection, broadly construed, understands self-sacrifice, self-denial, and agapic love as essential to dying well. In Vogt, notions of self-sacrifice and denial are replaced by notions of shared autonomy and filial love in the Christian community. While these two visions are not mutually exclusive, they constitute two distinct understandings of the good death.

Differences notwithstanding, Levering's collection supplements Vogt's work. Aristotle writes that the mean of virtue is not conceived abstractly, but rather is determined by the virtuous person. Thus, Vogt's discussion of the virtues must be given flesh by portraits of persons who embodied the virtues of patience, compassion, and hope. Levering's work provides these portraits. The reader sees patience modeled in the accounts of the death of Catherine of Genoa, compassion in Thomas More's letter to his daughter, and hope expressed by a dying Catherine of Siena.

Levering's book suffers from two deficiencies. He more than adequately communicates approaches to death (and life) in the early, medieval, and modern Church. Still, there is not a single voice from the contemporary Church. This absence is felt particularly because of the important changes, as Vogt notes, in the way people die today. For instance, in his introduction Levering briefly cites the late Henri Nouwen, but neglects to include any of his poignant writings on death. While Nouwen is not a canonized saint, an excerpt from his *Our Greatest Gift: Meditations on Dying and Caring* would have completed the collection and made it more contemporary.

Levering also omits a concluding reflection. How is the reader to understand Ignatius of Antioch's desire to be martyred in the

light of Thomas More's belief that Christ "wished his followers to be brave and prudent soldiers, not senseless or foolish" (81)? Levering provides a rich source of texts on dying without sufficient commentary. He abandons the reader to sort through ancient and medieval texts alone. The questions at the end of each excerpt provide space for pastoral reflection, but do little to aid in a substantive understanding of the texts.

Vogt's use of virtue ethics is insightful and is, as noted above, concerned with the patient's relationship to his community. Still, virtues of patience, compassion, and hope could have been augmented with a discussion of the virtue of justice. While I agree that the dying need to not only receive, but also practice, compassion, I do not believe that compassion is a sufficient social virtue for a good death. In a world of limited medical resources, patients should be aware that treatments they receive affect the treatments that are available to others. Therefore, the virtue of justice should not cease to inform patients' actions once they begin to die. Rather, in dying as in living, they should continue to account for the common good in their medical decisions.

On Christian Dying: Classic and Contemporary Texts has no single target audience, but may be useful for pastoral ministers, scholars, and those willing to contemplate the inevitable reality of death. Scholars will find limited use in the text, due to the format and the lack of footnotes and bibliography. The text could be used, however, as a primer for those teaching or researching issues regarding death and dying. Scholars will find much of interest in the well researched *Patience, Compassion, Hope and the Christian Art of Dying Well*. This synthetic work brings together various Christian traditions on death. Pastoral ministers who care for the dying will find it useful in their training and professional development.

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