

# THE CHRISTOCENTRIC LIFE FACING DEATH OF ST. FRANCIS

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## **Abstract:**

*Kematian merupakan persoalan eksistensial paling gelap dan sukar diterangkan, apalagi diterima, oleh manusia dalam hidupnya di dunia. Makalah ini ingin membahas persoalan tersebut dengan mendalami pandangan St. Fransiskus Asisi tentang kematian dan riwayat hidupnya sendiri yang berujung dengan kematian. Kekhasan Fransiskus adalah kehidupannya yang berpusat pada Kristus, dan kehidupan yang berpusat pada Kristus ini ternyata mempengaruhi pandangan dan sikap hidupnya terhadap kematian, termasuk ketika ia menghadapi kematiannya sendiri. Dari sisi ini, kematian yang dihadapi dengan pandangan dan sikap hidup Kristiani seperti terlihat pada St. Fransiskus Asisi menjadi suatu jawaban eksistensial atas persoalan kematian.*

**Keywords:** *St. Francis, life, death, christocentric.*

## **1. Introduction: The Mystery of Death**

The limited duration of our earthly life, definitively ended by death, is the clearest evidence of our human limitation, which can never be denied. After a period of his life, every human person, without exception, has to face this radical moment. Being aware of the meaningfulness of his life, the rational man decides freely on his attitudes and conduct to attain his goals of life. At the end, however, he cannot avoid such a decisive event at all. Then, the situation becomes more and more ironical, since this earthly life will end while nothing is known about what will happen to him next.

For the rational man, inevitable death is the most mysterious moment of his existence on this earth. While wondering on it throughout history, great thinkers and different traditions of religions and beliefs have sought the answer that is hidden meaning behind death and the mysterious continuity of human existence after

death. It seems that man's desire to find the meaning of his life and, furthermore, of his inevitable death, as well as the hope of continuing his human existence uninterruptedly after death, always go hand in hand with the diminishing time of every man's walking in this limited worldly life.

In the terminology of J.H. Newman (1801-1890), it could be said that when the idea of inevitable death is present, it is so only at a conceptual or notional level of mind. Yet it is very vaguely known that, as a matter of fact, such awareness has nothing to do with any direct implication to one's own existence. However, at other times, the awareness of death becomes so acute "that it concerns me personally and puts the whole meaning of my existence into question."<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, these two very different ways of self-awareness regarding death affirm that death, on the one hand is certainly a

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Gevaert, *Il problema dell'uomo, Introduzione all'antropologia filosofica* (Torino, Editrice Elledici, 2003<sup>2</sup>), 215. For a sufficiently deep reading on this problem of death see 214-251 with the following themes:

death as a fundamental problem of human existence (chapter VIII) and death and the prospect of hope (chapter IX).

constitutive element and always an accompanying reality of every human being. On the other hand, it comes inevitably as a great problem that can strongly bring absurdity to our human life. Willing to have a valid life while facing such terrible mysteries along our journey of life, it seems that we need a wise and mature attitude that, hopefully, can create an authentic and audacious conduct of life based on a right understanding of death.

This paper wants to face this question by elaborating on the life and sayings of St. Francis of Assisi. He is a man who once proposed to us a positive and hopeful attitude towards our “bodily death” mentioning it as his “sister”. At the same time, he urged us to reflect further on our “second death”, which is spiritual: “Be praised, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whose embrace no living person can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin! Happy those she finds doing your most holy will. The second death can do no harm to them. Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks, and serve him with great humility. Amen”.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. An illuminating light: the Christocentric death of St. Francis of Assisi<sup>3</sup>

Born in late 1181 or early 1182 in Assisi, St. Francis died at the age of 45. His death or *transitus* took place on the evening of October 3, 1226, on a Saturday, at the Porziuncola, after having blessed his spiritual children. In his life, St. Francis was hailed as a light that came to illuminate a world shrouded in darkness.<sup>4</sup> Thomas of Celano writes: “It shone like a bright star in the darkness of the night and like a morning light spread over the

darkness”.<sup>5</sup> In a poetic language, Dante also writes about his birth: “A sun was born into the world”.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that in the perspective of this figuring the saint as a light shining in the darkness, we can rightly observe some aspects of death properly faced by St. Francis of Assisi. This death of the saint is actually one of the countless Christian deaths, which had as their foundations Christ himself, who was once crucified, died and has risen from the dead. Of course, if we say that this “transit” to the new and eternal life of the great saint truly brings a light that illuminates our earthly life, it is so because this death has Christ’s eternal life itself as its illuminating light.

Immediately after his death, Brother Elias, who accompanied the poor man at the last moment, wrote: “While he was alive he looked modest and there was no beauty in his face: there was no member left in him that was not torn apart. His limbs were stiff from the twitching of the nerves, as happens in a dead man. But, after his death his face became beautiful, shining with admirable candor and consoling to behold. The limbs, previously rigid, became flexible and foldable here and there as they wanted to arrange, like a tender child.”<sup>7</sup>

As a matter of fact, the decisive moment of the transit was not a hidden thing at all. Tommaso da Celano writes: “Twenty years had passed since his conversion and, as it had been communicated to him by divine revelation, his last hour was about to expire. It had happened like this. While Blessed Francesco and Brother Elia were staying together in Foligno, one night a white-robed priest, grave and venerable, appeared to Brother Elia in a dream, who said

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<sup>2</sup> St. Francis of Assisi, Wyatt North, *The Life and Prayers of Saint Francis of Assisi* (Wyatt North Publishing, LLC, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The main materials can be seen in *Fonti Francescane* (Editrici Francescane, 2007<sup>IX</sup>). On his death see *Vita prima* (First Life) of before Tommaso da Celano, chap. VIII, entitled “Ultime parole e atti prima della morte” (Last words and acts before death), 290-292; *Vita seconda* Thomas of Celano, entitled “Il transito del padre santo” (The transit of the holy father), chap. CLXII-CLXVI, 500-506; *Leggenda maggiore* (Major Legend) of San Bonaventura, chap. XIV, “La sua pazienza. Il

transito”, (His patience. The transit), 635-641. See also *Lettera di frate Elia* (Letter of Brother Elias), 190-196. His chronology see XVII-XXIV. “Cantico di frate sole” (Canticle of brother sun) see 136-137.

<sup>4</sup> *Fonti Francescane*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Fonti Francescane*, 232.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.zenit.org/article-21166?l=italian>. Pope Benedict XVI presents the figure of St. Francis of Assisi in his catechesis for the general audience on Wednesday, January 27, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> *Fonti Francescane*, 195.

to him: 'Go, brother, warn Francis that, having turned eighteen years since he renounced the world to follow Christ, he has only two years left and then the Lord will call him to himself in the next life'.<sup>8</sup>

On the part of St. Francis himself, the moment of death is above all crucial, because the day of death is substantially connected to the eternal judgment. Being aware of the coming of his death himself, he admonishes us about this inevitable event of our life. In plain language, he once gave his advice for a just attitude regarding the tormenting day of death to the rulers of the peoples:

"Consider and see that the day of death is approaching. I therefore beg you, with all the reverence of which I am capable, not to forget the Lord, absorbed as you are by the cares and concerns of this world, and not to deviate from his commandments, for all who forget the Lord and turn away from his commandments are cursed and will be forgotten by him. And when the day of death comes, all those things they thought they possessed will be taken away from them. And the more wise and powerful they have been in this world; the greater will be the torments they will have to suffer in hell".<sup>9</sup>

St. Francis suggested also this precaution of vigilance to his brothers and sisters, emphasizing the importance of penance and forgiveness among men and women so that they themselves can receive God's forgiveness. Those who die in penance and in peace with others before his death will be in the kingdom of heaven.

"Do penance, bear fruits worthy of penance, because we will soon die. Give and it will be given to you, forgive and you will be forgiven; and if you do not forgive men their offenses, the Lord will not forgive you your sins. Confess all your sins. Blessed are those who die in penance, for they will be in the kingdom of heaven."<sup>10</sup>

Instead, it is necessary not to be unaware of the importance of penance for eternal life, to pay attention and to persevere in good. The saint says: "Woe to those who do not

die in penance, for they will be children of the devil whose works they do, and they will go into the everlasting fire. Beware and abstain from all evil and persevere in good to the end".<sup>11</sup>

These strong words of St. Francis reveal his perception of the punishment that is awaiting in the background. It will come immediately after death for those who do not convert to God during his earthly life. Behind this perception there is the ancient drama of Adam in the face of the devil:

"The Lord said to Adam: 'Eat the fruits of any tree, but do not eat from the tree of the science of good and evil'. Adam could therefore eat the fruits of any tree in Paradise; until he violated obedience, he did not sin. In fact, he who appropriates his will and exalts himself for the goods that the Lord says and works in him eats from the tree of the science of good; and thus, by suggestion of the devil and by the transgression of the command, it became for him the fruit of the science of evil. Therefore, you must bear the penalty".<sup>12</sup>

The story of Adam, the fallen man, has by no means ended in the devil's domain, thanks to the Savior Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father who became man since the moment of his incarnation. God becomes the poor Jesus. "He, who was rich above all else, wanted to choose poverty in this world, together with the most blessed Virgin, his mother," says St. Francis. After reflecting on the moment of Jesus' Last Supper, the saint deals with the divine will for salvation:

"And the will of his Father was this, that his blessed and glorious son, whom he gave us and was born for us, should offer himself, through his own blood, as a sacrifice and victim on the altar of the cross, not for himself, for through him all things were created, but in atonement for our sins, leaving us the example to follow in his footsteps. And he wants us all to be saved through him and that we receive him with a pure heart and with our chaste body."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Fonti Francescane, 290.

<sup>9</sup> Fonti Francescane, 111.

<sup>10</sup> Fonti Francescane, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Fonti Francescane, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Fonti Francescane, 78.

<sup>13</sup> Fonti Francescane, 99.

Then the saint mentions that for the motive of eternal life and of following Jesus Christ in congruence with his footsteps, it is necessary to love the enemies and to do good to those who hate each other: "O brothers all, let us carefully reflect that the Lord says: 'Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you', for our Lord Jesus Christ, whose footsteps we must follow, called his traitor a friend and offered himself spontaneously to his crucifiers. Therefore, our friends are all those who unjustly inflict tribulations and distress, martyrdom and death on us, and we must love them very much because, because of what they inflict on us, we have eternal life".<sup>14</sup>

With this message of following Jesus Christ in his footsteps, St. Francis was on the move from the hermit life to preaching to the peoples. Above all, the center of his message was still his own personality which was fully connected, totally centered and lovingly incorporated into Christ. Brother Elias, in the letter on the death of St. Francis, illustrates the spiritual energy that the saint's life ignites in the minds and hearts of others using a very evangelical and messianic language:

"Truly, the presence of our brother and father Francesco was the true light, not only for us who were his companions in the same profession of life, but also for those who were far away. Indeed, it was a light aroused by the true light, the one that illuminates those who were in darkness and sat in the shadow of death, to direct their steps on the path of peace. This he did, like true midday light. The light that came from above illuminated his heart and warmed his will with the fire of his love for him. Thus inflamed, he preached the Kingdom of God and converted the hearts of fathers towards children and fools to the prudence of the righteous and prepared a new people throughout the world for the Lord. His name is celebrated to the farthest reaches, and the whole universe is filled with amazement at his marvelous deeds."<sup>15</sup>

When he approached the day of his death, he begged the friars to transport him

quickly to Santa Maria della Porziuncola, "where for the first time he had clearly known the way of truth" and then had begun his religious life. Feeling that the hour of death was now imminent, he called two of his friars to him to sing praises to the Lord with a joyful soul for the coming of death, and indeed, for the coming of the true life centered in Christ. He blessed and asked that the passage from the Gospel according to John on the Last Supper would be read to him.<sup>16</sup>

Ending his life on earth, St. Francis invited all creatures to praise God with certain verses that he had composed, the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, where the verse on "sister death" is found.<sup>17</sup> "Even he exhorted the death, terrible and hateful to all, with praise and, going to meet her happily, invited her to be his guest: 'Welcome, my sister death!'"<sup>18</sup>

After his death, there were visions and miracles. Pope Gregory IX enrolled him in the register of saints two years later. A short time later, in his honor, a large basilica was erected in Assisi, today still the destination of many pilgrims who venerate the saint's tomb and enjoy the vision of the frescoes by Giotto, a painter who illustrated his life in a magnificent way.

### **3. A Life Centered in Christ which Defies Death**

Looking to the christocentric life and, indeed, the christocentric death of St. Francis, we meet with the answer of the Christian faith on the problem of death that is very clear: yes, death is a curse for man, but man is destined for eternal life. Death made this earthly life miserable, but this miserable condition of life is not definitive. And death, as a sad end, is not yet an invincible fact.

Saint Paul writes to his Corinthian friends about this faithful response in a very strong and also very beautiful language. For them and for many others down the centuries, his words truly bring the good news about death conquered by Christ:

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<sup>14</sup> Fonti Francescane, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Fonti Francescane, 194.

<sup>16</sup> Fonti Francescane, 290-291.

<sup>17</sup> Fonti Francescane, 137.

<sup>18</sup> Fonti Francescane, 503.

"Where is your victory, oh death? Where, oh death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Therefore, my beloved brothers, remain steadfast and unshakable, always doing your best in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord"(1 Cor 15: 55-58).

These words from Paul's pastoral letter express the content of the joyful Christian faith because of Christ's victory over death through the cross, and because of his resurrection from the dead to obtain eternal life for all men. Behind the term "victory" is manifested the struggle against the absurdity of human existence in the face of death and, from the point of view of the Christian faith in particular, against the sin that produced death in the world (Rom 5:12 ).

The victory against death and sin is "that victory" which is proper to Jesus Christ. Then Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, is the answer for the hope of immortality since he will lead men to his glorious life on the day of the resurrection of the dead that will come. The fatigue of earthly life, being faithfully united with the sacrifice of the crucified and risen Christ, becomes a way of salvation for eternal life. The death of the earthly body is only a moment of transit to perfect the soul entering into the life of Christ while waiting for the day of the resurrection of the body.

Thus St. Paul tells the faithful about his life centered in Christ: "And this so that I can know him, the power of his resurrection, the participation in his sufferings, becoming conformed to him in death. With the hope of reaching the resurrection from the dead. However, not that I have already won the prize or have now arrived at perfection; I just try to run to conquer it, because I too was conquered by Jesus Christ." (Phil 3, 10-12).

He too, on the other occasion, says about his christocentric life: "I was crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but

Christ lives in me. This life in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20). This is the way of justification and glorification for men who have fallen because of sin, that is: following Christ, living a christocentric life as his true disciples, as Jesus says: "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it; he who will lose his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mk 8:35).

In the most ancient time, this way of following Christ was faithfully and particularly chosen by Christians, in particular by the martyrs. Then, in different forms and situations, the monks preferred it with the same fire of love for Christ and for the gospel. So later, throughout the history of Christianity from its very beginning to this day, the glorious struggle for Christ can be found in the faithful members of his mystical body, that is, the Church, in many growing ways. Precisely from this perspective we should mention the glorious life centered in Christ of St. Francis.

On the one hand, it is true that not everyone who hears the news of the Christian faith is interested by it. There are not a few Christian men who leave their Christianity for making a "difference" in their life. On the other hand, it is also true that one cannot count how many Christians are dying in the faithful life of following Christ. For many people, in the light of this faith in Christ, the tree of death in earthly life, that is, the cross, becomes the tree of eternal life.<sup>19</sup>

At the center of the Christian faith, it cannot be said that if until his death someone dies in a faithful life then his life, his death and the fruits of this life and this faithful death are only fruits of his own autonomous act. On the contrary of saying that the faithful die victoriously with regard to their own virtues, it is more just and honest to say that in the face of death, we must above all emphasize the role of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the "*Dominus vivificans*", who make us faithful persons until our death. Thanks to Christ and to the power

<sup>19</sup> Such an expression is found in the Roman preface of the holy cross. See Louis Bouyer, "Breve dizionario teologico," (Bologna, Edizioni Dehoniane, 1992), 258-259. For a magisterial reading on death in the light of the

Christian faith see Catechism of the Catholic Church (Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), art. 11 on the resurrection of the body" and art. 12 on the eternal life.

and wisdom received from his Spirit, the faithful man has the supernatural capacity to face death perfectly, just as Jesus said to Martha about his dead brother, Lazarus: "I am the resurrection and the life; that he believes in me, even if he dies, he will live; whoever lives and believes in me will not die forever." (Jn 11, 25-26).

#### 4. Conclusion

Being in the lordship of Christ and living faithfully and authentically a christocentric life, men have the opportunity to participate in his eternal life. Having St. Francis as the witness of such a life, men can face his future death with a joyful soul embracing his sister death to meet the true and eternal life in Christ. In the supernatural dominion and eternal kingdom of Christ, men will have the unbreakable and very solid foundation for obtaining the congruent and conceivable, uninterrupted and heavenly life. So, in the context of human existence seriously intimidated by terrible death, a life centered in Christ is still the best offer for the soul of men.

Closing our reflection on the fragment of the death of St. Francis and giving attention to his admonition regarding this glorious yet earthly life destined to death, we can examine how the substantial difficulty of human being in the face of death is fundamentally solved by the light of the Christian faith properly lived by St. Francis. Having a christocentric soul as lived lovingly by the saint, the Christian faith looks very bright, as it illuminates death strongly with its light.

In the personal life of St. Francis, the final darkness of earthly life becomes a celestial light through his consecrated life.<sup>20</sup> The absurd sadness of the rational man intimidated by bodily death ended with the serene life of a poor man faithfully following the shadows of Lord Jesus Christ. This illuminating light is of Christ, and this poor man is called "Francis".

With such an understanding on the christocentric life to face death with the victorious power of Christ, we can now finish this observation on death with Brother Elijah's words of faith and consolation given to his brothers as regards the death of St. Francis:

"Therefore, my children and brothers, do not want to abandon yourselves to excessive sadness, because God, Father of orphans, will comfort you with his holy consolation. And if you cry, my brothers, cry over yourself and not over him. In fact, while we are in the fullness of our life we are in death. He instead has passed from death to life and be filled with joy because, before leaving us, like another Jacob, he blessed all of his children and forgave all of them any guilt anyone committed or thought against him".<sup>21</sup>

#### Daftar Pustaka:

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<sup>20</sup> In recent universal documents on consecrated life, not any text on the theme of death can be found. It seems that this theme is very rich and bright, both to deepen the freely chosen consecrated life and to give true Christian

witness. In general, however, the ideality of consecrated life is in accordance with this emphasis of the Christian faith on death.

<sup>21</sup> Fonti Francescana, 194-195.