 Reading time: 4 min.

The annual All Souls Day commemoration presents us with reality that no one can deny: the end of our earthly life. For many, talking about death seems a macabre thing, to be avoided at all costs. But this was not so for St John Bosco; throughout his life he had cultivated the exercise for a happy death, setting the last day of the month for this purpose. Who knows if this is not the reason why the Lord took him to be with him on the last day of January 1888, finding him prepared…

Jean Delumeau, in the introduction to his work on *LaPaura in Occidente* (*Fear in the West)*, recounts the anguish he felt at the age of twelve when, as a new pupil at a Salesian boarding school, he first heard the "disquieting sequences" of the litany for a happy death, followed by an *Our Father* and *Hail Mary "*for the one among us who will be the first to die". Starting from that experience, from his early fears, his difficult efforts to become accustomed to this fear, his teenage reflections on the last things, his personal patient search for serenity and joy in acceptance, the French historian drew up a project of historical investigation focused on the role of "guilt" and the "pastoral use of fear" in the history of the West and came to an interpretation "of a very broad historical panorama: for the Church, suffering and the (temporary) annihilation of the body are less to be feared than sin and hell. Man can do nothing against death, but – with God's help – it is possible for him to avoid eternal punishment. From that moment on, a new type of fear – a theological one – replaced what came before and was visceral and spontaneous: it was an heroic remedy, but still a remedy since it introduced an exit where there was nothing but emptiness; this was the kind of lesson that the religious responsible for my education tried to teach me."[1]

Even Umberto Eco recalled with ironic sympathy the exercise for a happy death that he was presented with at the Nizza Monferrato Oratory:

Ancient religions, myths, rituals made death, though always fearful, familiar to us. We were accustomed to accepting it by the great funeral celebrations, the wailing women, the great *Requiem* Masses. We were prepared for death by sermons on hell, and even during my childhood I was invited to read the pages on death by Don Bosco's *Companion of Youth.* Hewas not just the cheerful priest who made children play, but had a visionary and flamboyant imagination. He reminded us that we don't know where death will surprise us – whether in our bed, at work, or in the street, from the bursting of a vein, a bad cold, a haemorrhage, a fever, a plague, an

earthquake, a lightning strike, ‘perhaps as soon as we have finished reading these thoughts.’ At that moment we will feel our head grow dull, our eyes hurt, our tongue parched, our jaw closed, our chest heavy, our blood frozen, our flesh consumed, our heart pierced. Hence the need to practise the Exercise for a Happy Death […]. Pure sadism, one might say. But what do we teach our contemporaries today? That death takes place far from us in hospital, that we no longer usually follow the coffin to the cemetery, that we no longer see the dead. […] Thus, the disappearance of death from our immediate horizon of experience will make us much more terrified when the moment approaches, when faced with this event that also belongs to us from birth – and with which the wise man comes to terms throughout life.”[2]

In Salesian houses the monthly practice of the exercise for a happy death, with the recitation of the litany included by Don Bosco in the *Companion of Youth* remained in use from 1847 until the threshold of the Council.[3] Delumeau recounts that every time he happened to read the litany to his students at the Collège de France he noticed how astonished they were: “It is proof” he writes, “of a rapid and profound change in mentality from one generation to the next. Having rapidly become out of date after being relevant for so long, this prayer for a happy death has become a document of history insofar as it reflects a long tradition of religious pedagogy.”[4] The scholar of mentalities, in fact, teaches us how historical phenomena, in order to avoid misleading anachronisms, must always be approached in relation to their internal coherence and with respect for cultural otherness, to which every collective mental representation, every belief and cultural or cultic practice of ancient societies must be traced. Outside those anthropological frameworks, that set of knowledge and values, ways of thinking and feeling, habits and models of behaviour prevalent in a given cultural context, which shape the collective mindset, it is impossible to adopt a correct critical approach.

As far as we are concerned, Delumeau’s account is a document of how anachronism not only undermines the historian. Even the pastor and educator run the risk of perpetuating practices and formulas outside the cultural and spiritual worlds that generated them: thus, at the very least, besides appearing strange to the younger generations, they may even be counterproductive, having lost the overall horizon of meaning and the “mental and spiritual tools” that made them meaningful. This was the fate of the prayer for a happy death that was used for over a century, for students in Salesian works all over the world, then – around 1965 – completely abandoned, without any replacement that would safeguard its positive aspects. The abandonment was not only due to its obsolescence. It was also a symptom of the ongoing process of the eclipse of death in Western culture, a sort of

“interdiction” and “prohibition” now strongly denounced by scholars and pastors.[5]

Our contribution aims at investigating the meaning and educational value of the exercise for a happy death in Don Bosco’s and the first Salesian generations’ practice, relating it to a fruitful secular tradition, and then identifying its spiritual features through the narrative testimonies left by the Saint.

(continued)

---

[1] Jean Delumeau, *La Paura in Occidente* (14th-18th centuries). *La città assediata,* Turin, SEI, 1979, 42-44.

[2] Umberto Eco, “La bustina di Minerva: Dov’è andata la morte?”, in *L’Espresso*, 29 November 2012.

[3] The “Prayers for a Happy Death” are still to be found, with a few substantial variations, in the revised Manual of Prayer for Salesian Educational Institutions in Italy, which ultimately replaced *The Companion of Youth*, used until then: Centro Compagnie Gioventù Salesiana, *In preghiera. Manuale di pietà ispirato al Giovane Provveduto di san Giovanni Bosco*, Torino, Opere Don Bosco, 1959, 360-362.

[4] Delumeau, *La Paura in Occidente*, 43.

[5] Cf. Philippe Ariés, *Storia della morte in Occidente* Milan, BUR, 2009; Jean-Marie R. Tillard, *La morte: Enigma o Mysterio?* Magnano (BI), Edizioni Qiqajon, 1998.