

□ Reading time: 11 min.

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1. The exercise for a happy death in Salesian institutions and the centuries-old tradition of the *Praeparationes ad mortem*

From the very beginnings of the Oratory established in Valdocco (1846-47), Don Bosco proposed the monthly exercise for a happy death to his boys as an ascetic tool aimed at encouraging – through a Christian perspective on death – a constant attitude of conversion and overcoming personal limitations and ensuring, through a proper confession and receiving communion, the favourable spiritual and psychological conditions for a fruitful journey of Christian life and the building up of virtues, in docile cooperation with the action of God’s grace. The practice at that time was in use in most parishes, religious and educational institutions. For the people it was the equivalent of the monthly recollection. In the Salesian Oratories it was held on the last Sunday of each month, and consisted, as we used read in the *Rule*, “in a careful preparation, in order to make a good confession and communion, and to finalise spiritual and temporal things, as if we were at the end of our life.”^[1]

The exercise became common practice in all Salesian educational institutions. In the colleges and boarding schools it was held on the last day of the month, with teachers and boys together.^[2] The Salesian Constitutions themselves, from the very first draft, established how it would be done: “The last day of each month will be a day of spiritual retreat, in which, leaving temporal affairs aside as far as possible, each one will recollect, will make the exercise for a happy death, arranging spiritual and temporal things, as if he were to leave the world and set out for eternity.”^[3]

The procedure was simple. The boys, gathered in the chapel, read the words together that were in the *Companion of Youth*, which provided the essential spiritual and theological meaning of the practice. First of all, the prayer of Pope Benedict XIII was said “to ask from God the grace not to die a sudden death” and to obtain, through the merits of Christ’s passion, not to be taken “out of this world so much”, so as to still have an appropriate “time for penance” and to prepare oneself for “a happy and graceful passage [...], so that I may love you [Lord Jesus] with all my heart, praise you, and bless you for ever.” Then the prayer to St Joseph was read to beg “complete forgiveness” for one’s sins, the grace to imitate his virtues, to “always walk on the way that leads to Heaven” and to be defended “from the enemies of my soul at the end of my life; so that comforted by the hope of flying

[...] to possess eternal glory in heaven I might breathe my last pronouncing the holy names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.” Finally, a reader read out the litany for a happy death, each element of which was answered with “Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.”^[4] The devotional exercise was followed by personal confession and “general” communion. “Extraordinary” confessors were invited for the occasion, so that everyone had the opportunity and full freedom to settle matters of conscience.

Salesian religious, in addition to the prayers said in common with the pupils, made a more detailed examination of conscience. On 18 September 1876, Don Bosco explained to his disciples how to make it fruitful:

It will be useful to compare month to month: did I benefit from this month, or did I go backwards? Then come to the details: how did I behave in this virtue, in that virtue?

And especially let us review what regards the vows and the practices of piety: with regard to *obedience*, how have I behaved? Have I progressed? For example, did I do the assistance I was given to do? How did I do it? In that class, how did I commit myself? Regarding *poverty*, whether in clothes, food, cells, do I have anything that is not poor? have I been greedy? Have I complained when I lacked something? Then come to *chastity*: have I given rise to evil thoughts? Have I detached myself more and more from the love of relatives? Have I mortified myself in gluttony, looks, etc.?

And so pass on the practices of *piety* and note especially if there was ordinary lukewarmness, if the practices were done without motivation.

This examination, whether longer or shorter, should always be done. Since there are several who have occupations from which they cannot exempt themselves on any day of the month, it will be lawful to keep these occupations, but let each one on the said day make it his own [duty] to carry out these considerations and to make special good resolutions.^[5]

The aim, therefore, was to encourage regular monitoring of one's life to improve oneself. This primary role of encouraging and supporting virtuous growth explains why Don Bosco, in the introduction to the Constitutions, said that the monthly practice for a happy death, together with the annual retreat, is “the fundamental part of the practices of piety, the one that in a certain way embraces them all”, and concluded by saying, “I believe that the salvation of a religious can be said to be assured if every month he approaches the Holy Sacraments, and examines his conscience, as if he had to depart from this life for eternity.”^[6]

Over time, the monthly exercise was further refined, as we read in a note

inserted in the Constitutions promulgated by Fr Michael Rua after the 10th General Chapter:

a. The exercise for a happy death is to be made in common, and in addition to what our Constitutions prescribe, these rules are to be kept in mind: 1) In addition to the usual meditation in the morning, a half hour of meditation is to be done again in the evening, and this meditation is to reflect on the *novissimi* [the last things]; 2) It is to be done as a monthly review of the conscience, and the confession on that day is to be more accurate than usual, as if in fact it were the last one of your life, and Holy Communion is to be received. 3) After Mass and the usual prayers, the prayers indicated in the manual of piety are to be recited; 4) One should think for at least half an hour about the progress or regression that one has made in virtue during the past month, especially with regard to the intentions made in the retreat, the observance of the Rules, and make firm resolutions for a better life; 5) All, or at least part, of the Constitutions of the Pious Society should be reread on that day; 6) It will also be good to choose a patron saint for the month that is about to begin.

b. If anyone is unable, because of his occupations, to make the exercise for a happy death in common, or to perform all the aforementioned works of piety, he shall, with the permission of the Rector, perform only those works that are compatible with his role, postponing the others to a more convenient day.[\[7\]](#)

These indications reveal substantial continuity and harmony with the centuries-old tradition of the *preparatio ad mortem* widely documented by books since the beginning of the 16th century. The evangelical calls for vigilant and real expectation (cf. Mt 24:44; Lk 12:40), to keep oneself prepared for the judgement that will determine one's eternal fate among the "blessed" or the "cursed" (Mt 25:31-46), together with the Lenten admonition "*Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*", have, over the centuries, constantly nourished the considerations of spiritual teachers and preachers, inspired artistic representations, been translated into rituals, devout and penitential practices, suggested intentions and loving longings for eternal communion with God. They have also aroused fears, anxieties, sometimes anguish, according to the spiritual sensibilities and theological perspectives of the various times.

The learned reflections of Erasmus' *De praeparatione ad mortem* and other humanists,[\[8\]](#) imbued with a genuine evangelical spirit but so erudite as to feel like rhetorical exercises, had gradually given way between the 17th and early 18th century to the moral exhortations of preachers and the meditative considerations of

spiritualists. A pamphlet by Cardinal Giovanni Bona stated that the best preparation for death is the remote one, carried out through a virtuous life in which one daily practises dying to oneself and avoiding all forms of sin, to live according to God's law in prayerful communion with him.^[9] He urged constant prayer to obtain the grace of a happy death; he suggested devoting one day a month to preparing close to death in silence and meditation, purifying the soul with a "most diligent and sorrowful confession", after an accurate examination of one's state, and approaching Communion *per modum Viatici*, with intense devotion;^[10] he then invited people to end the day by imagining themselves on their deathbed, at the moment of their last moment:

You will renew more intense acts of love, thanksgiving and desire to see God; you will ask forgiveness for everything; you will say: 'Lord Jesus Christ, in this hour of my death, place your passion and death between your judgement and my soul. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. Help me, O saints of God, hasten, O angels, to sustain my soul and offer it up before the Most High.' [...]. Then you will imagine that your soul is being led to the dreadful judgement of God and that, by the prayers of the saints, your life will be prolonged so that you can do penance: therefore strongly proposing to live more holily, in future you will consider yourself and behave as dead to the world and living only for God and for penance.^[11]

John Bona closed his *Praeparatio ad mortem* with a devout aspiration focused on the longing for heaven permeated with intense mystical inspiration.^[12] The Cistercian cardinal had been a student of the Jesuits. It was from them that he had drawn the idea of the monthly day of preparation for death.

Meditation on death was an integral part of retreats and popular missions: death is certain, the moment of its arrival is uncertain, we must be ready because when it comes, Satan will multiply his assaults to ruin us eternally: "What consequence then? [...] Get good habits now in life. Do not be content merely to live in the grace of God, nor to remain a single moment in sin; but habitually live such a life, by the continual exercise of good works, that at the last moment the Devil will not have the temptation to make me lose myself for all Eternity."^[13]

From the 17th century onwards and throughout the 18th century, preachers emphasised the importance of the theme, adapting their reflections according to the sensibilities of the Baroque taste, with a strong emphasis on the dramatic aspects, without however distracting the listeners' attention from the substance: the serene acceptance of death, the call to conversion of the heart, constant

vigilance, fervour in virtuous works, self-offering to God and the yearning for eternal communion of love with him. Gradually, the exercise for a happy death took on an ever-increasing importance, until it became one of the main ascetic practices in Catholicism. A model of how it should be carried out is offered, for example, in a 17th-century pamphlet by an anonymous Jesuit:

Choose one day of each month which is the most free from all other business, on which you must with particular diligence engage in Prayer, Confession, Communion and Visitation of the Blessed Sacrament.

The Prayer of this day will need to be two hours over two sessions: and the subject of it may be the one we will mention. In the first hour, conceive as vividly as you can the state in which you find yourself already dying [...]. Consider what you would like to have done when you are dying, first with regard to God, secondly with regard to yourself, thirdly with regard to your neighbour, mixing in this meditation various fervent affections of repentance, intentions, and requests to the Lord, in order to implore from him the virtue of amending yourself. The second Prayer session will have as its subject the strongest motives that can be found for willingly accepting death from God [...]. The affections of this Meditation will be an offering of one's life to the Lord, a protest that if we could prolong it, beyond His most divine blessing, we would not do so; a request, to offer this sacrifice with the spirit of love which requires the respect due to His most loving Providence, and disposition.

You must make your Confession with more particular diligence, as if it were the last time that you have gone to wash yourself in the most precious blood of Jesus Christ [...].

Communion, too, must be done with more extraordinary preparation, and as if you were taking Communion for Viaticum, adoring the Lord whom you hope to have to adore for all Eternity; thanking Him for the life He has granted you, asking forgiveness for having spent it so badly; offering yourself ready to end it, because He wants it so, and finally asking Him for grace to assist you in this great step, so that your soul, leaning on its Beloved, may pass safely from this Desert to the Kingdom.[\[14\]](#)

The commitment to spreading the practice of the happy death did not limit the considerations of preachers and spiritual directors to the subject of the *novissimi* (the last things), as if they wanted to base the spiritual edifice solely on the fear of damned eternity. These authors knew the psychological and spiritual damage that the anxiety and anguish over one's salvation had on the most sensitive souls. The collections of meditations produced between the end of the

17th century and the middle of the 18th century not only insisted on God's mercy and abandonment to him, to lead the faithful to the permanent state of spiritual serenity that is proper to those who have integrated the awareness of their own temporal finitude within a solid vision of faith, but they ranged over all the themes of Christian doctrine and practice, of private and public morality: truth of the faith and evangelical subjects, vices and virtues, sacraments and prayer, spiritual and material works of charity, asceticism and mysticism. The consideration of man's eternal destiny expanded to the proposal of an exemplary and ardent Christian living, which translated into spiritual paths oriented towards personal sanctification and the refinement of daily and social life, against the backdrop of a substantial theology and a refined Christian anthropology.

One of the most eloquent examples is provided by the three volumes by Jesuit Giuseppe Antonio Bordoni, which collect the meditations offered every week for over twenty years to the confreres of the *Compagnia della buona morte*, which he established in the church of the Holy Martyrs in Turin (1719). The work was much appreciated for its theological substance, its lack of rhetorical frills, and its wealth of concrete examples, and was reprinted dozens of times up to the threshold of the 20th century.^[15] Also linked to the Turin religious environment are the *Discorsi sacri e morali per l'esercizio della buona morte* – more marked by the sensitivity of the time but just as solid – preached in the second half of the 18th century by Fr Giorgio Maria Rulfo, spiritual director of the *Compagnia dell'Umiltà* formed by ladies of the Savoy nobility.^[16]

The practice proposed by St John Bosco to the students of the Oratory and Salesian educational institutions had, therefore, a solid spiritual tradition of reference.

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^[1] John Bosco, *Regolamento dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales per gli esterni*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1877, 44.

^[2] Cf. John Bosco, *Regolamento per le case della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1877, 63 (part II, chapter II, art. 4): "[...] Once a month the exercise for a happy death will be done by all, preparing for it with some sermon or other exercise of piety."

^[3] [John Bosco], *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*

secondo il Decreto di approvazione del 3 aprile 1874, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana, 1877, 81 (cap. XIII, art. 6). The same was established in the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, with a very similar wording: "The first Sunday or the first Thursday of the month will be a day of spiritual retreat, in which, leaving temporal affairs as far as possible, each one will collect herself, make the exercise for a happy death, arranging her spiritual and temporal things, as if she had to leave the world and go to Eternity. Let some reading be done according to the need, and where possible the Superior shall procure from the Director a sermon or a conference on the subject", *Regole o Costituzioni per le Figlie di Maria SS. Ausiliatrice aggregate alla Società salesiana* (ed. 1885), Title XVII, art. 5, in John Bosco, *Constitutions for the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians* (1872-1885). Critical texts edited by Cecilia Romero, Rome, LAS, 1983, 325.

[4] Giovanni Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi obblighi degli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell'uffizio della Beata Vergine e de principali vespri dell'anno coll aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre ecc.*, Torino, Tipografia Paravia e Comp. 1847, 138-142.

[5] Central Salesian Archives, A0000409 *Prediche di don Bosco – Esercizi Lanzo* 1876, notebook XX, ms by Giulio Barberis, pp. 10-11.

[6] John Bosco, *Ai Soci Salesiani, in Rules or Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales* (ed. 1877), 38.

[7] *Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales preceded by an introduction written by the Founder St. John Bosco*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1907, 227- 231.

[8] *Des. Erasmi Roterodami liber cum primis pius, de praeparatione ad mortem, nunc primum et conscriptus et aeditus...*, Basileae, in officina Frobeniana per Hieronymum Frobenium & Nicolaum Episcopium 1533, 3-80 (*Quomodo se quisque debeat praeparare ad mortem*). Cf. also *Pro salutari hominis ad felicem mortem praeparatione, hinc inde ex Scriptura sacra, et sanctis, doctis, et christianissimis doctoribus, ad cujusdam petitionem, et aliorum etiam utilitatem, a Sacrarum literarum professor Ludovico Bero conscripta et nunc primum edita*, Basileae, per Joan. Oporinum, 1549.

[9] Giovanni Bona, *De praeparatione ad mortem...*, Roma, in Typographia S. Michaelis ad Ripam per Hieronimum Maynardi, 1736, 11-13.

[10] *Ibid.*, 67-73.

[11] *Ibid.*, 74-75.

[12] *Ibid.*, 126-132: "Affectus animae suspirantis ad Paradisum".

[13] Carlo Ambrogio Cattaneo, *Esercizi spirituali di sant'Ignazio*, Trent, by Gianbatista Monauni, 1744, 74.

[14] *Esercizio di preparazione alla morte proposto da un religioso della Compagnia di Gesù per indirizzo di chi desidera far bene un tale passo*, Roma, per gl'Eredi del Corbelletti [1650], ff. 3v-6v.

[15] Giuseppe Antonio Bordoni, *Discorsi per l'esercizio della buona morte*, Venice, in the printing house of Andrea Poletti, 1749-1751, 3 vols.; the latest edition is the Turin edition by Pietro Marietti in 6 volumes (1904-1905).

[16] Giorgio Maria Rulfo, *Discorsi sacri, e morali per l'esercizio della buona morte*, Turin, presso i librai B.A. Re e G. Rameletti, 1783-1784, 5 vols.