 Reading time: 10 min.

(continuation from previous article)

3. Death as a moment of joyful encounter with God

Like all the considerations and instructions in the *Companion of Youth* the meditation on death is marked by a marked didactic concern.[1] The thought of death as a moment that fixes all eternity must stimulate the sincere purpose of a good and virtuous life that is fruitful:

Consider that your eternal happiness or your eternal damnation depend on that fateful moment. […] Do you understand what I am saying? On that moment depends whether you go to heaven or to hell; whether you will be always happy or always tormented; whether you will be forever a child of God or a slave of the devil; whether you will rejoice with the angels and the saints in heaven or groan and burn with the damned in hell for all eternity. These are great issues for your soul and reflect that upon a good life depends a happy death and eternal glory. Therefore delay no longer but prepare to make a good confession and to put your conscience in order. Promise God to forgive your enemies, to repair the scandal you have given, to be more obedient, to abstain from meat on the appointed days, to waste no more time, to keep the Holy days of Obligation in a worthy manner, to fulfil the duties of your state. Meanwhile place yourself in the presence of God and tell him with all your heart: "My God, from this moment I return to you. I love you and I want to love and serve you unto death. Most Holy Virgin, my Mother, help me in that moment. Jesus, Joseph and Mary, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you."[2]

However the most complete and also the most expressive of Don Bosco's unbderstanding and cultural frameworks on the theme of death is found in his first narrative text, written in memory of Luigi Comollo (1844). There he recounts the death of his friend "…saying the holy names of Jesus and Mary, his beautiful soul quietly left his body and flew, as we devoutly hope, to its rest in the Lord's peace. His face was serene and a smile played about it as if he was seeing something marvellous."[3] But the placid passing so succinctly described had been preceded by a detailed description of a tormented final illness: " It is also good to note that an innocent soul adorned with so many virtues as was Comollo's, tells us that there is nobody who does not dread the approaching hour of death. He too experienced great apprehension."[4] Louis had spent the last week of his life but seemed "sad and melancholic, all taken up with the thoughts of divine judgement." On the

evening of the sixth day, “Around eight o’clock the fever became very strong; at a quarter past eight he begun to go into convulsions and lost his senses. At first he cried out at length as if he were terrified by some frightening object or some grim spectre. From then until half past eight he came back to his senses somewhat and looking at those standing around he cried out in a loud voice: ‘Oh, judgement!’ Then he began writhing with such strength that five or six of us around him could hardly keep him in the bed.”[5] After three hours of delirium, he “he returned fully to his senses.” and confided to his friend Bosco the reason for his agitation: he had seemed to find himself in front of a wide-open hell, threatened by “a countless number of monsters”, but he had been rescued by a squad “of strong warriors” and then, led by the hand of “a Woman” (“whom I consider to have been the Mother of us all”), he had found himself “in a delightful garden” which is why he now felt calm. Thus, “the fact was that however great was his fear of appearing before God, he then demonstrated his desire that this moment should come immediately. There was no more melancholy or sadness on his face. He was all smiles and happily wanted to sing psalms, hymns or spiritual praises.”[6]

Tension and anguish are resolved in a joyful spiritual experience: it is the Christian vision of death sustained by the certainty of victory over the infernal enemy through the power of Christ’s grace, which opens the gates of blessed eternity, and through the maternal assistance of Mary. It is in this light that Comollo’s account should be interpreted. The “great abyss like a deep huge furnace” near which he finds himself, the “countless monsters of all horrible and different shapes” that try to plunge him into the abyss, the “strong warriors” who rescue him “from such a predicament”, the long staircase leading to the “delightful garden” defended “by many serpents ready to devour anyone who tried to climb up”, the Woman “dressed in great magnificence” who takes him by the hand, guides him and defends him: it all goes back to the religious imagery that encapsulates a solid theology of salvation in the form of symbols and metaphors, the conviction of being personally destined for happy eternity and the vision of life as a journey towards beatitude, undermined by infernal enemies but sustained by the omnipotent help of divine grace and the patronage of Mary. The Romantic sense, which imbues the fact of faith with intense emotionality and drama, spontaneously makes use of traditional folk symbolism, yet the horizon is one of a broadly optimistic and historically active vision of faith.

Further on, Don Bosco reports an extensive discourse by Louis. It is almost a testament in which two main interrelated themes emerge. The first is the importance of cultivating throughout life the thought of death and judgement. The arguments are those of the preaching and devout publicity of the time: “you do not

know if your days on earth will be short or long; but however uncertain may be the hour of death, it will certainly come; therefore do things so that your entire life is a preparation for death, for judgement… Men only think of death occasionally, they believe that this hour will come even though they don't want it to, but they do not ready themselves, so when the moment arrives they are agitated and afraid, greatly embarrassed in finding themselves needing to sort out matters of their soul."[7]

The second theme is the link between Marian devotion and the good death. "Since for all the time that we struggle in this vale of tears we have no other more powerful advocate than Mary most holy, you must therefore profess a special devotion to her. Oh! If people could be persuaded of the happiness that comes at the hour of death from devotion to Mary, everyone would be competing to find new ways to give her special honour. It will be her, with her son in her arms, who will be our defence against the enemy of our soul at the final hour. Even though all of hell might be arrayed against us, with Mary in our defence, victory will be ours. Look for other things from those who recite some prayer to Mary, or offer some simple mortification, and then believe they are protected by her, while they lead a shameless life. […] May you always be truly a devotee of Mary by imitating her virtues, and you will experience the sweet effects of her goodness and love."[8] These reasons are close to those presented by Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (1673-1716) in the third chapter of the *Traité de la vraie dévotion à la sainte Vierge* (which, however, neither Comollo nor John Bosco could have known).[9] All classical Mariology, conveyed by preaching and ascetic books, insisted on such aspects: we find them in St Alphonsus (*Glorie di Maria*);[10] before him, we find them in the writings of Jesuits Jean Crasset and Alexander Diaotallevi,[11] from whose work Comollo is said to have drawn inspiration for the invocation before his death:

Holy Virgin, kind mother, dear mother of my beloved Jesus, of all creatures you alone were worthy to bear him in your immaculate womb. Through the love with which you gave him suck, held him on your arms, suffered with him in his poverty, saw him ill-treated, spat upon, flogged and finally die suffering terribly on the cross. Through all of this obtain for me the grace of courage, keen faith, firm hope, ardent charity, sincere sorrow for my sins; and to all the favours that you have granted me throughout my life add the grace that I might die a holy death. Yes, dear and merciful Mother, assist me at this moment when I am about to present my soul to divine judgement; you yourself can present me in the arms of your divine Son; if you promise me this here I am with ardent and frank spirit, dependent on your clemency and goodness and I present my soul through your hands to the Supreme

Majesty from whom I hope to receive mercy.[12]

This text shows the solidity of the theological framework underlying the religious sentiment with which the story is imbued, and reveals a “regulated” Marian devotion, an austere and very concrete spirituality.

The *Cenni sulla vita di Luigi Comollo (Life of Louis Comollo)*, with all its dramatic tension, represent the John Bosco’s sensitivity as a seminarian and student at the *Convitto*. In later years, as his educational and pastoral experience among young people grew, the Saint preferred to highlight only the joyful and soothing side of Christian death. We see this especially in the biographies of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, but we find examples of it already in the *Companion of Youth* where, narrating the holy death of Aloysius Gonzaga, he states, “The things that can disturb us at the point of death are especially the sins of our past life and the fear of divine chastisements in the next life”, but if we imitate him by leading a virtuous life, which is “truly angelic”, we will be able to welcome with joy the announcement of death as he did, singing the *Te Deum* full of “joy” – “Oh what joy, we are leaving: *Laetantes imus”* – and “in the embrace of the crucified Jesus he died peacefully. What a beautiful death!”[13]

All three *Lives* conclude with the invitation to be prepared for a good death. In Don Bosco’s pedagogy, as mentioned, the subject was presented with particular emphases aimed at conversion of the heart which is “frank and resolute”[14] and of the total gift of self to God, which generates an ardent living, fruitful of spiritual fruits, of ethical and at the same time joyful commitment. This is the perspective in which, in these biographies, Don Bosco presents the exercise for a happy death:[15] is an excellent tool to educate to the Christian vision of death, to urge an effective and periodic review of one’s lifestyle and actions, to encourage an attitude of constant openness and cooperation to the action of grace, fruitful in works, to positively dispose the soul to the encounter with the Lord. It is not by chance that the concluding chapters depict the last hours of these three characters as a fervent and calm expectation of the encounter. Don Bosco reports the serene dialogues, the “tasks” entrusted to the dying,[16] the farewells. The instant of death is then described almost as a blissful ecstasy.

In the last moments of his life, Dominic Savio had the prayers for a happy death read to him by his father:

“Dad, it is time; get my *Companion of Youth* and read me the prayers for the Exercise of a Happy Death”.
At these words his mother burst into tears and hurried from the room. His father’s

eyes filled with tears, but choking back his sobs, he got the book and read the prayers. As he went through them Dominic answered clearly.
“Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me …”.
When his father reached the final part which runs: “When for the first time my soul will see the wonderful majesty of God, do not drive it away, but take it to heaven to sing your praises for all eternity . . .”, he said:
“Yes, Dad – that is what I want so much, to sing the praises of Jesus for all eternity”.
He dropped off to sleep again, but it was like he was reflecting on things of great importance. He awoke after a short while. Then in a clear voice he said: “Goodbye, Dad, goodbye . . . what was it the parish priest suggested to me … I don’t seem to remember . . . Oh, what wonderful things I see …”.
And so saying, with a beautiful smile on his face, and his hands joined on his breast he gave up his soul to God without any struggle.[17]

Michael Magone passed away “peacefully”, “He parted his lips as if to smile and gently fell back in death”, after kissing the crucifix and invoking, “Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I place my soul in your hands.”.[18]

The final moments of Francis’ life are characterised by extraordinary phenomena and uncontainable ardour: “His face appeared to be stronger and to have more colour in it than when he had been healthy. Its beauty and radiance was such that it eclipsed the infirmary lights”; “the dying boy lifted his head a little and stretched out his hands as if to shake hands with someone he loved. Then in a joyful resonant voice he sang, ‘Praise Mary, […]. Afterwards he made several efforts to lift himself up and devoutly stretching out his hands, he began to sing again, *O Jesus of burning love* […]. He seemed to have become an angel with the angels in paradise,”[19]

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[1] Cf. Bosco, *The Companion of Youth*, 36-39 (consideration for Tuesday: *Death*).

[2] *Ibid.*, 38-39.

[3] [John Bosco], *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo morto nel Seminario di Chieri ammirato da tutti per le sue singolari virtù. Scritti da un suo collega*, Torino, Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero, 1844, 70-71.

[4] *Ibid*., 49.

[5] *Ibid.*, 52-53.

[6] *Ibid*., 53-57.

[7] *Ibid*., 61.

[8] *Ibid*., 62-63.

[9] Grignion de Monfort's work was only discovered in 1842 and published in Turin for the first time fifteen years later: *Trattato della vera divozione a Maria Vergine del ven. servo di Dio L. Maria Grignion de Montfort*. Version from the French of C. L., Turin, Tipografia P. De-Agostini, 1857.

[10] Second part, chapter IV (*Vari ossequi di divozione verso la divina Madre colle loro pratiche*), where the author states that to obtain Mary's protection "two things are necessary: the first is that we offer her our respect with our souls cleansed of sins [...]. The second condition is that we persevere in devotion to her" (*Le glorie di Maria di sant'Alfonso Maria de' Liguori*, Torino, Giacinto Marietti, 1830, 272).

[11] Jean Crasset, *La vera devozione verso Maria Vergine stabilita e difesa*. Venezia, nella stamperia Baglioni, 1762, 2 vols.; Alessandro Diotallevi, *Trattenimenti spirituali per chi desidera d'avanzarsi nella servitù e nell'amore della Santissima Vergine, dove si ragiona sopra le sue feste e sopra gli Evangelii delle domeniche dell'anno applicandoli alle meditoli alla medesima Vergine con rari avvenimenti*, Venezia, presso Antonio Zatta,

1788, 3 vols.

[12] [Bosco], *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo*, 68-69; cf. Diotallevi, *Trattenimenti spirituali...*, vol. II, pp. 108-109 (Trattenimento XXVI: *Colloquio dove l'anima supplica la B. Vergine che voglia esserle Avvocata nella gran causa della sua salute*).

[13] Bosco, *The Companion of Youth,* 70-71.

[14] Cf. Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele (Life of Michael Magone)*, 24.

[15] For example, cf. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico (Life of Dominic Savio),* 106-107: ‘On the morning of his departure he did with his companions the exercise for a happy death with such devotion in confessing and taking communion, that I, who witnessed it, do not know how to express it. It is necessary, he said, that I do this exercise well, because I hope it will truly be for me that of my good death’.

[16] “But before I let you leave for paradise I would like to charge you with an errand […]. When you are in paradise and have seen the great Virgin Mary, give her a humble and respectful greeting from me and from those in this house. Pray to her that she deigns to give us her holy blessing; that she may receive us all under her powerful protection, and help us so that none of those who are, or who Divine Providence will send to this house may get lost”, Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele (Life of Michael Magone)*, 82.

[17] Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico (Life of Dominic Savio)*, 118-119.

[18] Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, 83. Fr. Zattini could no longer control his emotions and exclaimed: “O Death, you are not a punishment for innocent souls! For these you are the great benefactor who opens the doors to joys that will last for ever.. Oh, why cannot I be in your place, Michael?” (ibid., 84).

[19] John Bosco, *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d’Argentera*, Turin, Tip. dell’Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales, 1864, 169-170.