

# **“WELCOME, MY SISTER DEATH!” A Reflection Inspired by St. Francis’ Experiences of Death**

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## **Abstract**

The understanding of death varies depending on peoples world views and religious beliefs. The undersanding and the experiences of St. Francis of death is intersesting to reflect. He accepted death as a part of human existence, so at the approach of his death he said, “Welcome, my sister death!” Francis’ view about death was transformed by his experiences of faith and fraternal worldview. By reflecting death inspired by St. Francis’ experiences of death we prepare ourselves to accept our death. Death is not our enemy, but a part of our human existence. In our death we will rest in peace.

**Key words:** *God, sister death, life, reflection, experience, existance, preparation.*

## **Introduction**

A few times I have made a reflection about death. It was not easy for me to say “rest in peace” especially when people who died was young and because of accident. Many people think that the death is frightening, even perceive it as the most fearful enemy of their life. During my presence in Auckland, New Zealand in 2013, almost every day in Mass Celebration we pray for departed soul of the faithful, so through the mercy of God they rest in peace. In fact, one day every human being will die, and before dying he/she is likely to be involved in the death of a member of his/her family. The question, should people view of death as an enemy?

St. Francis’ experience of death gives us a unique understanding. At the approach of his death he said, “Welcome, my sister death!” He called death as his sister and considered himself as the brother of the death. Before he expressed this statement, he had written the similar expression in a part of his fourteen-verse *Canticle of the Creatures*. He wrote, “Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape.” St. Francis believed that all of creatures

lived as a brother and sister one another in the womb of God the Father. He was sure that one day all of these creatures will die.

People in general and I are afraid of death. However, reflecting on the experiences of St. Francis about death can help us to understand the deep meaning of it. By repeating the phrase "welcome, sister death!", the fear of death lessens slowly. The death is not an enemy but a part of human existence, even the death is our sister. So when people die, we hope that they will rest in peace.

### **The Understanding of Death**

What is death? What is the understanding of death in general? We will answer these two questions shortly.

#### *The Meaning of Death*

Death is the last phase of dying. The exact moment of death can not often be determined accurately. Death really occurs when the vital function of the body have ceased long enough that their restoration can not be accomplished. We call this biological death. Usually the confirmation of death is made by physician.<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Understanding of Death in General*

The understanding of death varies depending on peoples world views and religious beliefs. Here we describe it in two ways. The first is the view that death is the enemy of life. According to this view, human beings should conquer and destroy death, so that he/she can achieve the ultimate happiness. The second is that death is a part of human existence. According to this view human life is paradoxical. A man/woman who knows life, should also knows death. Man/woman is happy if he/she accepts both life and death.

The earliest and most primitive ideas associated death with a demon. People were afraid of passing the cemetery at night. For example in Egypt, death was regarded predominantly as an enemy, whom one sought to face after the catastrophe by the preservation of the corpse.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. A. Osbourn, "Death", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, n. 4, Washington, The Catholic University of America, 1967, p. 684.

<sup>2</sup> A. Closs, "Death (Primitive Concept of)", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, n. 4, Washington, The Catholic University of America, 1967, p. 686-687.

To view death as an enemy and to associate it with a demon is a concept still alive today. The mass preface of Easter contains the idea, "For he is the Lamb who has taken away the sins of the world; by dying he has destroyed our death, and by rising, restored our life."<sup>3</sup> This idea is revived from the core of the apostolic kerygma that taught the death and Resurrection of Christ brings salvation for all men and ensures man's resurrection. Christ "destroyed death" (2 Tim 1, 10), he conquered the sin and the kingdom of satan.<sup>4</sup> This teaching formed the idea for the faithful that death is an enemy and has been defeated.

The second view, nowadays, some people are not afraid of death. There are various reasons that people accept death, for example: to end the heavy pain some people exercise their last right, and choose to die<sup>5</sup>; to defend their country some people dare to die. There is an ethical problem when people choose such actions, because they choose death to hasten an end to life. In such actions, death is a false way to attain the end. Some people accept death as a part of human existence. We find such ideas also in the ancient culture of China. Death is looked upon not so much as an ending of life but as a mere interruption, which is followed by reincarnation and existence in other form, in another world. The idea of death as a sleep or a deliverance was a late development.<sup>6</sup> In 12th century Europe St. Francis expressed a beautiful statement, "Welcome, Sister death!". In his deep experience death is not an enemy but a part of human existence.

### *The Understanding of Death in the Time of St. Francis*

We can comprehend the understanding of death in the time of Francis from the stream of theology in 13th century Europe and from the statement of St. Francis about death. In this era the influence of St. Augustine's view about death were strong. St. Augustine combined the

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<sup>3</sup> Preface of Easter I in Order of Mass; cf. Kelly, P.J. "Death, Preparation for", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, n. 4, Washington, The Catholic University of America, 1967, p. 695.

<sup>4</sup> H. Koster, "Death (in the Bible)", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, n. 4, Washington, The Catholic University of America, 1967, p. 685-686.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Kevorkian, "A Fail-safe Model for Justifiable Medically Assisted Suicide", in *Last Right, Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia Debated*, Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Centre, 1998, p. 263-266.

<sup>6</sup> A. Closs, "Death (Primitive Concepts of)", p. 686.

story of Adam and the idea of Plato to explain his view about death.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, although not strong, the influence of Stoa's view that was adopted by Thomas Aquinas, existed and gain popularity later.

St. Augustine cited the story of Adam to explain his view about death. In Genesis (2, 16-17) the Lord God commanded Adam, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall die." Since Adam, men have died without exception. According to this idea, death is imposed upon man as a punishment.<sup>8</sup> St Augustine also adopted Plato's idea that the whole wretchedness of history as a punishment, the consequence of culpability in prehistoric times – in other words, of a fault not committed by present man himself, but whose consequences he must nevertheless bear. St Augustine said, "As soon as man is born, it must once and necessarily be said: he cannot escape death."<sup>9</sup> Of all human evils, death is the worst; it is the most extreme of all human suffering. So, death is a punishment, the worst evil, it is not natural, and not inherent in the constitution of human nature.<sup>10</sup>

Although not prominent in 13th century Europe, Stoa's view about death existed. According to the idea of the ancient Stoa, "Death is not punishment at all, but nature; *mors est hominis natura, non poena.*"<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas accepted this idea but he combined with the idea of St Augustine. He said, "Death is both something imposed as a punishment and something natural."<sup>12</sup> So, death is in certain sense is according to nature and in a certain sense contrary to nature.

We can comprehend also the understanding of death in the time of Francis from his statements. In one phase of his life he said that the death was painful and fearful. He wrote,

And you think that you will possess this world's vanities for a long time, but you are deceived because a day and an hour will come of

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<sup>7</sup> "All Christian thinkers before Thomas Aquinas were 'Platonist'; all defined man as the soul which uses the body as the musician hits lute." Josef Pieper, *Death and Immortality*, Burns and Oates, London, 1969, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> J. Pieper, *Death...*, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> The opinion of St. Augustine in, J. Pieper, *Death...*, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> J. Pieper, *Death...*, p. 51, 60

<sup>11</sup> The view of Stoa in J. Pieper, *Death...*, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> The idea of Thomas Aquinas in J. Pieper, *Death...*, p. 63.

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which you give no thought, which you do not know, and of which you are unaware when the body becomes weak, death approaches, and it dies a bitter death.<sup>13</sup>

Francis seemed to link death as punishment for sinfulness, to death as part of the human condition. St. Francis's view of death developed and matured over the course of his life.<sup>14</sup>

## **St. Francis' Experiences of Death**

### *The Death Is Painful and Fearing*

Like many people in his time, St. Francis in one phase of his life was afraid of death. This fearful tone was found in his exhortation,

But let everyone know that whenever and however someone dies in mortal sin without making amends when he could have [done so] and did not, the devil snatches his soul from his body with such anguish and distress that no one can know [what it is like] except the one experiencing it.<sup>15</sup>

He comprehended that death was inevitable, painful, and to be feared.

St. Francis seems to link death as punishment for sinfulness, to death as the human condition. He ever interpreted death as the threat of annihilation, and the termination of existence. However, Francis' view of death did not stop in this position. Along his journey of life, prayer, and ministry, Francis remained in conviction of death's inevitability, but he started to view its meaning and his relationship to death rather differently. As he matured spiritually he dared to refer to death as his "sister."

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel P. Horan, *Embracing Sister Death: The Fraternal Worldview of Francis of Assisi as a Source for Christian Eschatological Hope*. An Intersection of Theology and Culture, the Journal. com, Google.com.

<sup>14</sup> D. P. Horan, *Embracing Sister Death...*

<sup>15</sup> Regis J. Armstrong et al. (ed.), *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents*, vol. I, New York, New City Press, 1999, p. 51.

## ***Death Is a Sister***

### *The Designation of Brother or Sister*

Nowadays St. Francis is called the saint of all creation and the patron of environment. He had and experienced panentheism<sup>16</sup>. He spoke creatures in a brotherly fashion. In his every day life he addressed them as “brothers” and “sisters”<sup>17</sup> because he believed that all creation is present in the biggest womb of God the Father.<sup>18</sup> He reasoned that if all creatures are present in God, therefore God is also present in all creatures. “There can be no doubt that Francis experienced the sacred in the cosmos and entered into communion with God through the medium of created things and indeed in the very depths of created things.”<sup>19</sup> In

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<sup>16</sup> Although panentheism as a stream of theology was emerged by Karl Friedrich Krause (1781–1832), St. Francis (1181–1226) had experienced the idea of panenthesim. Panentheism is different to pantheism. Extreme pantheism implicates the similarity God with creatures. Panentheism is also different with extrem dualism that said God is separated from creature. Naughton said that panentheism synthesized pantheism and dualism. According to traditional panentheism, God presence on the creatures and the creatures can influence God. According to modern panentheism, all of creatures presence in God and God presence in all of creatures; and “If God is the sacred Whole, then that Whole is indeed more than the sum of its parts.” Pantheism admits that God is eternal, while earth is temporal. God is different with creature, but God has intensive relation with creatures and all of creatures are connected to God. E.R Naughton, “Panentheism”, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, no. 10, p. 943-944; cf. Jay McDaniel, *With Roots and Wings, Christianity in an Age of Ecology and Dialogue*, Orbis Books, New York, 1995, p. 97.

<sup>17</sup> Francis considered himself as a brother to every creature. He named creatures as brothers or sisters depends on grammatical gender in the language of Italy. Indeed in his religious experience, “The choice of sex is not determined by the rather arbitrary grammatical gender, but is connected with the way in which the substance itself is dreamed, imagined, and assigned a value. The choice of sex depends on the play of the imagination as it focuses on material substances; it is called for by the values attributed to the element and is given accordingly.” Eloi Leclerc, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell, *The Canticle of Creatures, Symbols of Union, an Analysis of St. Francis of Assisi*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, 1977, p 14.

<sup>18</sup> Eloi Leclerc, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell, *The Canticle of Creatures...*, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Eloi Leclerc, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell, *The Canticle of Creatures...*, p.12

his eyes, each creature in its own way and by its very being was a manifestation of the power of the beauty of the goodness of God.

Francis respected creatures not because they are useful, but as the object of a respectful and brotherly sympathy.<sup>20</sup>

More than all creatures lacking reason, he most affectionately loved the sun and fire. For he used to say: 'At dawn, when the sun rises, everyone should praise God, who created it for our use, because through it our eyes are lightened by day. And in the evening, when it becomes night, everyone should praise God for another creature, Brother Fire through whom the eyes are lightened at night.'<sup>21</sup>

He had also a special love for water, stone, wood, and flowers because these creatures are good symbols to express the beautiful relation of God with creation.<sup>22</sup>

Sometimes he shared his food with animals and he invited all of creatures to praise God. "He could discern the secrets of the heart of creatures like someone who has already passed onto the freedom of the glory of the children of God."<sup>23</sup> He composed the canticle of creatures that is famously called "The Canticle of Brother Sun"<sup>24</sup>. St. Francis felt awe of God when looking up to see the sun, the moon, and the stars, and when looking down to see the water, the stone, the wood, the flower, and the worm. If he saw the worm he remembered the text of Scripture about the Redeemer, 'I am a worm and not man'. That is why he used to pick up worms from the road and put them in a safe place so that they would not be crushed by the footsteps of passersby.<sup>25</sup> He experienced that he was a part of creation, so he called all creatures his brothers and

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<sup>20</sup> Eloi Leclerc, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell, *The Canticle of Creatures...*, p. 11, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Regis J. Armstrong et al. (ed.), *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents*, vol. III, New York, New City Press, 2001, p. 367.

<sup>22</sup> Regis J. Armstrong et al. (ed.), *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents*, vol. III..., p.366.

<sup>23</sup> Regis J. Armstrong et al. (ed.), *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents*, vol. I,... p. 251.

<sup>24</sup> St. Francis composed "The Canticle of Brother Sun" in 14 verses. In this canticle he called brother sun, sister moon and stars, brother wind and air, sister water, brother fire, sister earth, and sister death. Eloi Leclerc, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell, *The Canticle of Creatures...*, p. xviii.

<sup>25</sup> Regis J. Armstrong et al. (ed.), *Francis of Assisi*, vol. I..., p. 250.

sisters constantly. Before he gave up his life into the hands of God the Creator, he said, "Welcome, my sister death!"

*Welcoming the Sister Death*

At the approach of his death, Francis' view about death was transformed by his experiences of faith and fraternal worldview. Death was not feared as a enemy any more, but it was accepted by him a sister. He saw himself as a part of creation, which is finite, and he experienced death as part of human existence.

We find Francis' salutation to sister death in Canticum of the Creatures, and in his expression before dying. In verse 12 of Canticum of the Creatures he said, "Praise be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape."<sup>26</sup> His expression was very fraternal at the last time before dying. While he was lying on his bed sick, with the greatest devotion and reverence for the Lord, he stretched out his arms and hands with great joy of mind and body, and said to his body and soul, "Welcome, my Sister Death."<sup>27</sup> The transformation from fear of death to welcome it was a part of his experience of faith and of his fraternal worldview. He experienced that all of creation presence in God, and God presence in all creation. He viewed that his life is connected to God and to all creation. As a part of creation, he accepted that his life followed the natural order of creation. All living creation experienced death, so that as part of creation, human beings also die. So, for St Francis death was not seen as something alien and to be feared, but it was a part of natural human existence. In particular, that death is worthy to be a kind of to praise Lord.

Francis received death as the mystery that can only be fully understood through personal experience. He experienced that death was inescapable, and no man can ever flee sister death. Francis never forgot that Christian message is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By calling death as his sister, Francis experienced that the Christian faith has a sacred message about human death and also the death of Jesus Christ. Death is not the end of human life but it gives human beings the opportunity to be human in it.

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<sup>26</sup> Regis J. Armstrong et al. (ed.), *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents*, vol. III..., p. 368.

<sup>27</sup> Regis J. Armstrong et al. (ed.), *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents*, vol. III..., p. 204.



Before welcoming sister death finally at the approach of his death, he had welcome sister death implicitly in some moments. For example: when he embraced a leper and when he met the Sultan of the Saracens. When he embraced a leper, Francis demonstrated he was not afraid of death. In the European Middle Ages, those inflicted with leprosy kept a distance from the social order. In some local mythologies they were understood to hover indiscriminately between life and death. Francis' desire to meet the Sultan of the Saracens indicated the presence of God with him, so he was not afraid of death. For at that time there was a fierce war between the Christians and the Saracens.<sup>28</sup> A cruel edict had been issued by the Sultan stating that whoever would bring back the head of a Christian would receive as a reward a gold piece. Francis was not terrified by the fear of death, but rather drawn by desire for it. After praying and strengthened by the Lord, he confidently chanted that prophetic verse, "Even if I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I shall not fear even because you are with me".<sup>29</sup>

### **The Paradoxical Existence of Human Beings**

By reflecting on the experiences of St. Francis about death, we know that death is not an enemy but a part of human existence, even the death is our sister. St Francis expressed his experience of death in the brotherhood relationship. Life and death exist together in human beings, so the existence of human being is paradoxical. When a man/woman is born, he/she at the same time he/she begins to die. When human beings are growing he/she is also dying. When human beings is in death he/she is also in eternal life. In every act of our existence death is present from the beginning and it will be present until to our mortal existence.<sup>30</sup>

Death itself is not bad. The persons or the means that cause death can be bad, for example: murder, direct abortion, and euthanasia. These acts cause unnatural death and they are contra to human life. The owner of life and death for human beings is God and therefore God must

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<sup>28</sup> Regis J. Armstrong et al. (ed.), *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents*, vol. I, ... p. 231.

<sup>29</sup> Regis J. Armstrong et al. (ed.), *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents*, vol. II, New York, New City Press, 2000, p. 602.

<sup>30</sup> Josef Pieper, *Death...*, p. 39, 58-59; cf. James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong, Original Sin through Easter Eyes*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1998, p. 116.

determine the moment of the death. The Catholic teachings categorize euthanasia as murder. The proponents of euthanasia do not agree with the Catholic teaching, they recommend that in painful situation man/woman can exercise his/her last right, that is the right to die.<sup>31</sup>

Christ saved us by his life and his death. He is God who becomes a man and He is a man who becomes God, experiencing death. His awful death is often stressed to indicate his great love and redemption to the faithful. The affirmation that death was conquered in Christ's resurrection is central in the Christian message. This affirmation sounds that death is the enemy of life. In the reality of resurrection and salvation, death is not the enemy of life because Christ accepts death as a part of his eternal life.

The existence of human beings is paradoxical. A man/woman who knows life, should also know death. Man/woman must be willing to trust his death to God even as he trusts his life to Him. The man/woman who is forgetful of death, is not mindful of life either. Human beings can meet Christ in his/her life and also in his/her death.

### **Preparation for Death**

Death is natural in human reality, so we do not need to defeat, or to destruct it. Death is also not the final estrangement from God, so we do not need to avoid and to deny it. By reflecting death inspired by Francis' experience, we could receive it actively, and we can understand life from the view of sister death. An important activity is preparation for death. There are some preparations which we can make, for example: praying for departed relatives, maintaining cemetery well, and reflecting death as a part of our existence.<sup>32</sup>

Praying for departed relatives is useful not only for departed relatives but also for those who pray. Praying for departed souls was done in Judaeo-Christian tradition as we read in 2 Mc 12.39-45. "Judas and his men at once besought God in prayer that He would forgive the sin of these men, who had fought for His cause."<sup>33</sup> St John Chrysostom in

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<sup>31</sup> J. Kevorkian, "A Fail-safe Model...", p. 263-266.

<sup>32</sup> Josef Pieper, *Death...*, p. 58-59; cf. J. Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong...*, p. 117, 119; J.H. Wright, "Death (Theology of)", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, n. 4, p. 690.

<sup>33</sup> J.H. Wright, "Dead, Prayers...", p. 672.

the last decade of the fourth century regards the practice of praying for the dead, especially in the Eucharistic sacrifice to implore the divine mercy for the departed. He said that God can look upon the prayers and good works done by the living, especially as united in worship to Christ's sacrifice in the Mass. By celebrating the Mass we prepare ourselves for death as eternal union with Christ.<sup>34</sup> By praying for departed relatives, we hope that God forgives their sin so that they rest in peace with God. We pray also for us by beseeching the help of the communion of saints, so that they pray for us. And especially we beseech the help of Mother Mary to pray for us at the hour of our death. By saying and repeating the church's night prayer which is a preparation for sleep we prepare ourselves for death as well. We prepare for our death as Simeon said, "Let your servant go in peace."<sup>35</sup>

Visiting the grave of relatives and pray for them in the cemetery can help us to receive death as the human existence. And by maintaining cemetery well, we are not scary but we can receive that death is a part of our human nature. By practicing these activities we experience relation with our relatives who passed away and we communicate ourselves to our sister death.

The most important preparation is reflecting our death as a part of our human existence. Our reflection helps our awareness to experience death as a sister. Our reflection on St. Francis' experiences of death can help our preparation. We defend our life but we also receive our sister death. We don't need to prolong our life and we don't need also to shorten it. Sister death will become a kind to praise the Lord, and at the approach of our death, like Francis, we will say, "Welcome, my sister death!"

## **Conclusion**

The transformation from fear of death to receive it as a sister in the experience of Francis of Assisi can help us to deepen our faith, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39).

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<sup>34</sup> J.H. Wright, "Dead, Prayers...", p. 673.

<sup>35</sup> J.H. Wright, "Dead, Prayers...", p. 671 - 673; cf. Kelly, P.J. "Death, Preparation for", p. 695 - 696.

From the side of sister death we can honor our life deeply. The death of Nelson Mandela on 5 December 2013 was a beautiful example. His death was celebrated greatly because he lived well. Archbishop Thabo Makgoba said, "Through his example, he has set the standard for service to country and mankind worldwide, whether we are individual citizens, cabinet ministers or presidents, and continues to call on us all to better serve our fellow human beings and contribute to the betterment of our communities."<sup>36</sup> Anti-Apartheid activist and mother of former president Thabo Mbeki, Epainette Mbeki said: "He's not dead, he's asleep... South Africans should celebrate his life."<sup>37</sup> I end this reflection with the idea of Alfonsus Maria de Liguori about death that sounded similar with St. Francis' experiences of death. He said that with faith we wait our death happily. God helps us to receive it. So in death we rest in peace.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> "Death of Nelson Mandela" in *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, Google.com.

<sup>37</sup> "Death of Nelson...".

<sup>38</sup> Alfonsus Maria de Liguori, *Kematian itu Indah, Bagaimana Menghadapinya?* Jakarta, Obor, 2001, p 23, 26.

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