

# When Those We Love Die

by Regis Martin

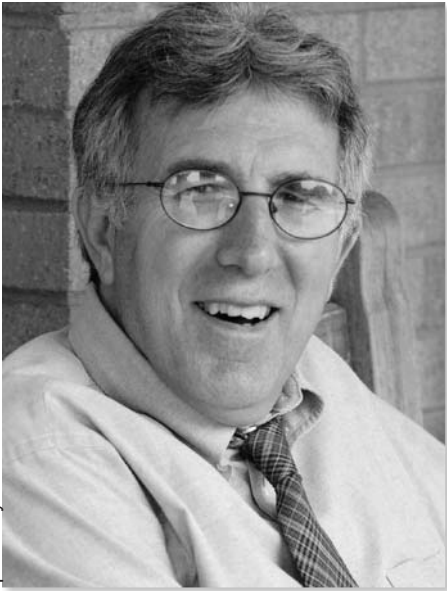


photo by Rob Pernet

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When it comes to thinking about life after death, it is unwise to make facile predictions about who goes where. Unless one were a prophet, and so able to peer through the window of eternity, one should never presume to know the outcome of another's life. Those who have gone to the undiscovered country, as Shakespeare calls it, from whose bourn no traveler returns, do not leave maps behind for the living to find. When we die we embark upon a journey more mysterious than any that awaits us here below.

Nor should anyone actually want to know the outcome since prayer, which is the voice of hope, would then have nothing to say. What is the point of asking God to look kindly upon the dead if you already know where they are? Presumption, the Church tells us, is a sin.

But it is not the most grievous sin. That distinction, we are told, belongs to despair, a sin against the Holy Ghost, which, so long as one remains in its grip, cannot be forgiven. However, when forced to choose between the two, one could do worse than to presume upon the awful mercy of God. "Because of His infinite goodness," St. Thomas Aquinas tells us, "it is more proper to God to spare and to show mercy than to punish. For the former belongs to Him by reason of His nature, the latter only by reason of our sins."

So why do I bring all of this up? A wonderful man I knew died last week, whose soul I am strongly tempted to place within the highest precincts of

heaven. Not that I am about to do so, mind you, only that so much holiness annealed in suffering gives me confidence of his final and triumphant return to God. Besides, if this incredibly holy guy did not go straight to God, what hope have I got of getting in? His last years, so steeped in suffering, endeared him to all of us, but surely to God most especially—for the cruciform shape his life had come to assume. Had he been conscious at the end he could certainly have said with Sir Thomas More who, in deflecting the taunts of his enemies at the scaffold, their point being that God would not prove so welcoming to More after death, confessed that God at least would not refuse one so blithe to go to him.

My young friend, who died at age thirty-six, leaving an expectant wife and six young children, must have been, for all that he was loath to leave those he loved most in this world, the happiest man on the planet when at last he fell into the waiting arms of God. Like a child overflowing with laughter and delight at gifts almost too wonderful to unwrap, so I imagine my friend radiant with joy before the face of God. How utterly, deliriously happy he must be at this moment.

Could God refuse one whose deepest, driving desire was to turn over everything to Him, including the poverty and brokenness of his own body? "Be worthy of the flame consuming you," declares Paul Claudel in a play depicting the action of grace on those who will not accept either despair or death as the last word on

life. Few were as worthy as this brave and resolute young man, his flesh wracked by kidney disease, congestive heart failure, and years of dialysis. Yet he was determined to see his suffering as a blessing, a way of atoning to God for his and the world's sins.

"Sickness is a blessing," he would insist. "Our souls are sick, so it's fitting for our bodies to reflect that sickness. It's also helpful because then we can come into direct contact with that sickness, experiencing through our bodies the weakness and imperfection of our souls. To the degree we experience that is the degree to which we can receive the grace of salvation."

At the funeral Mass attended by hundreds of family and friends whose lives had so often been touched by the quiet heroism and sacrifice of his life, the serene witness to grace in the midst of suffering, all were reminded of the message of Jesus Christ. All were reminded of those infinitely consoling words telling us that just as He was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so too might all of us look

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with expectant longing to that blessed day of deliverance.

I see him now so clearly in my mind's eye, embraced not only by the sheltering mystery of God, but by the tenderness of the Mother with whom he remained so simple and childlike in his devotion. She holds him now with the same maternal care she showed when, long ago, her crucified Son lay draped across her lap in the sleep of death. "World-mothering air, air wild," as Hopkins puts it in the last lines of that astonishing poem of his, "The Blessed Mother Compared to the Air We Breathe":

Wound with thee, in thee is led,  
Fold home, fast fold thy child.

Yes, it is both necessary and good that we mourn the loss of those we love; they have gone from us, and one would not wish such insensibility as neither to notice nor to lament. Their going from us leaves a wound that nothing can assuage. But, no, we do not despair because finally to love another in Christ is to say to that person, and to the family who misses that person the most: "Thou shalt not die!" In Jesus and Mary we shall someday see them again and, oh, how the angels and saints will sing to see the glory and the enchantment of that hour. Indeed, even now amid the darkness of human loss, one can sometimes almost hear the sound of that laughter at the heart of things. ■

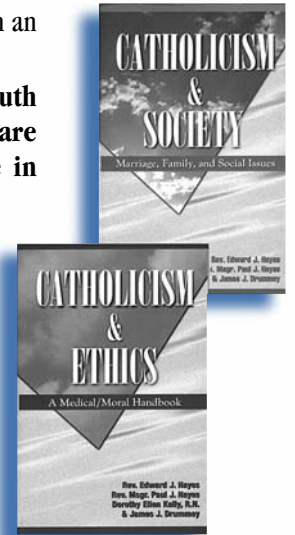
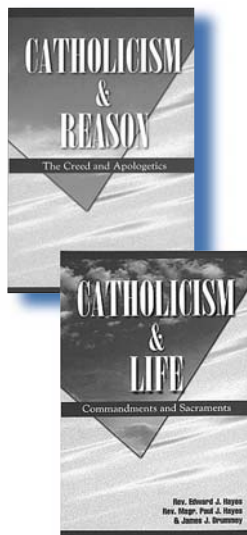
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