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"Death in theological reflection"

by

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Death in theological reflection

G. GRISEZ

INTRODUCTION: THE SUBJECT MATTER AND LIMITS OF THIS PAPER

In this paper, I shall criticize three mistaken views of death. Proponents of euthanasia are likely to employ these views in their propaganda, and Christians, misled by them, are likely to be impeded from safeguarding life. These mistaken views are of concern to theology inasmuch as they claim a basis in faith and/or seem to some Christians to pertain to faith. But I shall show that all of these views are incompatible with truths of Catholic faith.

I shall not deal here with the implications of theological mistakes about death for matters other than euthanasia, such as the pastoral care of the dying and the bereaved. Nor shall I deal with all the implications of a sound Christian conception of death – for example, the need to face up to the prospect of death, to prepare oneself realistically, and to accept death with confident hope when it cannot be rightly avoided or reasonably resisted. Nor shall I take up theological arguments for euthanasia whose unsoundness involves no mistake about death or compassion.¹ Though I shall discuss the views of some theologians, I shall not make a survey of the many theologies of death proposed by recent and contemporary theologians. Nor shall I deal with mistakes about death that have no theological basis – for example, the materialist view which, denying that human persons have souls that continue to exist after their death, rejects the very possibility of resurrection.²

¹ For instance, without assuming mistaken views about death or compassion, some may claim that in difficult cases a proportionate reason or the weighing of prospective good and bad consequences can justify euthanasia, and that proportionalism or consequentialism has grounds in traditional Catholic moral theology. These approaches are examined and found wanting by JOHN PAUL II, *Veritatis splendor*, nn. 71-83, *AAS* 1993, 85: 1190-1200.

² Some materialists present death as the ultimate unification experience – of merging back into the universe – or otherwise romanticize it; for examples, see JOHNSTON R.C. Jr., *Confronting Death: Psychoreligious Responses*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1988: 13-15. Since process philosophy has no basis in revelation, I also consider theologically irrelevant A. N. Whitehead's view that death is necessary to actualize fully an individual's life as an element of "the all-inclusive experience of God's becoming"; still, some do consider that view theologically relevant: see, e.g., KINAST R.L., *When a Person Dies: Pastoral Theology in Death Experiences*, New York: Crossroad, 1984, p. 114.

DEATH AS THE LIBERATION OF THE SPIRITUAL PERSON (Section I)

In the *Phaedo*, Plato portrays Socrates preparing to die and comforting his friends by arguing that the intellectual soul is immortal and that, at least for a true philosopher, death permanently releases the spiritual self from its encumbering body for a better life. The view can be reformulated, using a dualistic concept of *person* that Plato lacked: human persons are nonbodily selves that have and use bodies; death can benefit such spiritual persons by freeing them from their bodies, when these are no longer useful.

Though this dualistic concept of the human person has influenced and continues to influence the thinking of many Christians, it generally remains unstated. I know of no contemporary Catholic theologian who explicitly defends the dualistic notion that death liberates the spiritual person. However, the underlying dualistic logic continues to influence many.³ And Joseph Fletcher, writing as an Episcopalian moral theologian, straightforwardly asserts dualism:

“Physical nature – the body and its members, our organs and their functions – all of these *things* are a part of ‘what is over against us’, and if we live by the rules and conditions set in physiology or any other *it* we are not men, we are not *thou*. When we discussed the problem of giving life to new creatures, and the authority of natural processes as over against the human values of responsibility and self-preservation (when nature and they are at cross-purposes), we remarked that spiritual reality and moral integrity belong to man alone, in whatever degree we may possess them as made *imago Dei*. Freedom, knowledge, choice, responsibility – all these things of personal or moral stature are in us, not *out there*. Physical nature is what is over against us, out

³ For example, some of the theologies of death that will be discussed in section II, below, involve soul-body dualism. Again, dualism was implicit in the so-called majority working paper of Paul VI's, Pontifical Commission on Population, Family, and Births, *Documentum synbeticum de moralitate regulationis nativitatum*, 2.4: “Ipsum donum mutuuum per totam vitam perdurat, foecunditas biologica non est continua et est subiecta multis irregularitatibus, ideo in sfaerem humanam assumi et in ea regulari debet”. Since nothing assumes what it already is or has of itself, those who wrote that “biological fecundity ought to be assumed into the human sphere” clearly presupposed that the biological fecundity of human persons is not per se human. Dualism also influences those who hold that keeping people alive in no way benefits them if there is no prospect that they will ever gain or regain the ability to attain other goods. For example, McCORMICK R., *The Defective Infant* (2): *Practical Considerations*, The Tablet (London), 21 July 1984, p. 691, asserted: “Life is a value to be preserved precisely as providing the condition for other values and therefore in so far as these other values remain attainable. To say anything else is, I submit, to make an idol of mere physical existence”.

there. It represents the world of *its*. Only men and God are *thou*; they only are persons".⁴

When discussing euthanasia, Fletcher approvingly quotes from a statement by a group of ministers supporting its legalization: "We believe in the sacredness of *personality*, but not in the worth of mere existence or 'length of days'". He adds: "In the personalistic view of man and morals, asserted throughout these pages, personality is supreme over mere life. To prolong life uselessly, while the personal qualities of freedom, knowledge, self-possession and control, and responsibility are sacrificed is to attack the moral status of the person. It actually denies morality in order to submit to fatality".⁵

The view that death liberates the spiritual person is theologically refuted by the refutation of the dualistic conception of the person that underlies it. That conception is at odds with Scripture: exegetes agree that the sacred writers of both the Old Testament and the New conceive of the human being nondualistically, as a living whole that includes flesh, psyche, and spirit.⁶ The human person is neither the body nor the soul taken separately, but a unity involving both. Vatican II clearly affirms: The human person is "a unity of body and soul".⁷ Because of this unity, a person's body is not like clothing that he or she possesses and wears but could do without.

True, the image of God in human beings *primarily* is in their intelligence and ability to make free choices.⁸ But the human body also shares in the dignity of that image.⁹ Only insofar as human persons are bodily can they be male or female, and this differentiation contributes to their being in God's image, as Paul VI teaches: "The duality of sexes was willed by God so that man and woman together might be the image of God and, like him, a source of life".¹⁰ John Paul II likewise teaches that God creates human persons in his

⁴ FLETCHER J., *Morals and Medicine: The Moral Problems of: The Patient's Right to Know the Truth, Contraception, Artificial Insemination, Sterilization, and Euthanasia*, Boston: Beacon, 1960, p. 211. By contrast, see COOPER R.M., *Do I Own My Body?*, Anglican Theological Review 1973, 55: 420-433.

⁵ FLETCHER, *Morals and Medicine*, p. 191.

⁶ Cfr. v. *Man*, in BAUER J. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology. The Complete Sacramentum Verbi*, New York: Crossroad, 1981; v. *Body*, in FREEDMAN D.N. (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday, 1992.

⁷ "Corpore et anima unus, homo..."; COUNCIL VATICAN II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 14 for the synonymy of man and human person in this context, see COUNCIL VATICAN II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 15.2.

⁸ See ST. THOMAS, *Summa theologiae*, 1, q. 93, a. 6; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 356-357.

⁹ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 364.

¹⁰ PAUL VI, *Address to Members of "Équipes Notre-Dame"*, AAS 1970, 3 (62): 429.

own image and likeness, not only insofar as they are intelligent and free, but also insofar as they are made for communion with one another, empowered to procreate, and given dominion over the rest of the material world.¹¹

In explaining the sanctity of human life, John Paul II points out an important consequence of the person's unity: "All human life – from the moment of conception and through all subsequent stages – is sacred, because human life is created in the image and likeness of God. Nothing surpasses the greatness or dignity of a human person. Human life is not just an idea or an abstraction; human life is the concrete reality of a being that lives, that acts, that grows and develops..."¹²

Human life is the concrete reality of human persons. For them, as for other organisms, to be is to live, and to die is to cease to be.¹³

What, then, of the soul? Definitive Church teaching makes it clear that this spiritual element of the person survives and subsists after death, and that it will experience heaven or hell.¹⁴ However, the Church also teaches definitively that until death the soul is the "form" of the living human body.¹⁵ In the technical sense in which *form* is used here, it refers, neither to a mere quality of something nor to a complete reality, but to the intrinsic principle that makes a material thing be the kind of bodily reality it is. So, this Church teaching means that one's soul is not oneself, but rather is a spiritual constituent of oneself that, until death, makes the stuff of one's body be a human person.¹⁶

If human persons were spiritual beings whose death was their liberation, the raising of the body would be no blessing; rather, it would pointlessly and cruelly reimpose a burden.¹⁷ But, since a human being is a unity of body and

¹¹ See JOHN PAUL II, *General Audience* (14 Nov. 1979), *Insegnamenti* 1979, 2 (2): 1153-1157; ID., *Mulieris dignitatem*, AAS 1988, 80: 1662-1667.

¹² ID., *Homily at Capitol Mall* (Washington, D.C.), AAS 1979, 3 (71): 1271.

¹³ See ST. THOMAS, *Summa theologiae*, 1, q. 18, a. 2: in its most proper sense, to live simply means to exist according to a nature that includes capacities for various sorts of self-development.

¹⁴ See BENEDICT XII, *Benedictus Deus* (29 Jan. 1336), DS 1000-1002/530-31.

¹⁵ Against theories of the soul in conflict with the faith, this was taught by the Council of Vienne, *Fidei catholicae* (6 May 1312), DS 902/481; and by the Fifth Lateran Council, *Apostolici regiminis* (19 Dec. 1513), DS 1440/738.

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 365, explains what it means to say that the soul is the "form" of the body: "it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature".

¹⁷ That may be why the Athenian crowd responded badly (see Acts 17.32-33) to Paul's preaching when he mentioned Jesus' resurrection.

soul, dying is the human person's loss of concrete reality – his or her ceasing to be. That is why human salvation must involve bodily resurrection, as St. Thomas explains: "A person naturally desires the salvation of himself or herself; but, since the soul is part of the human body, it is not the entire human being, and my soul is not I; so, even if the [disembodied] soul reached salvation in another life, neither I nor any human being would thereby do so".¹⁸

DEATH AS A PERSON'S DESTRUCTION FROM WITHOUT AND CONSUMMATION FROM WITHIN (Section II)

During the thirty years or so before Vatican II, several Catholic theologians, responding to mostly similar concerns, published innovative accounts of death. While expressly rejecting body-soul dualism and avoiding open conflict with the Church's teaching about the substantial unity of the bodily person, these accounts, like dualistic theories, held death to be intrinsically necessary for human fulfillment and so, in itself, a benefit for the human person. I do not know that any of those theologians drew the conclusion that euthanasia can be justified for the sake of that benefit. But they all held the benefit to pertain to death itself, rather than to death only as a condition for entering into heavenly glory. And they claimed that the benefit accrued in a posited life-consummating free human act, which they referred to as the very act of death. These accounts easily lend themselves to rationalizations of euthanasia and are likely to confuse those working against it.

¹⁸ ST. THOMAS, *Super primam epistolam ad Corinthios lectura*, xv, lect. 2, ad v. 19; cf. ID., *De ente et essentia*, c. 2 (ed. Leonina, t. 43, pp. 371-72, ll. 105-50, 201-7); ID., *Quodlibetum* VII, q. 5, a. 1, ad 3; ID., *Summa theologiae*, 1, q. 75, a. 4. Some will object that it overstates the case to say that dying takes away the concrete reality of a human person (as John Paul II implies) and is his/her ceasing to be (as St. Thomas implies). Those objecting will argue that, in praying for the dead and to canonized saints, we surely are not praying for and to nothing, but for and to real human individuals, who must, in some true sense, still be persons. The answer is that, though a separated soul is not a human person, it is the spiritual remains of the individual whose form it was, and this remnant of the person can engage in some spiritual functions and carry on some relationships. As the subject of these functions and as involved in these relationships, the separated soul can even be said to be the ego humanum of the person whose soul it was: see CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Letter on Certain Questions Pertaining to Eschatology*, AAS 1979, 71: 941; also see GRISEZ G., *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life*, Quincy, Ill.: Franciscan Press, 1993, p. 465, n. 9. So, though human persons cease to be in dying, our relationships with the dead are with something real, and we continue to refer to separated souls by the familiar names of the persons whose souls they were and imagine those persons as if they had already risen: see ST. THOMAS, *Summa theologiae*, 2-2, q. 83, a. 11, ad 5.

The different theologians' innovative accounts of death diverge in some important respects.¹⁹ But, except where noted, the differences are not significant for the purpose of this reflection. So, I shall simply summarize and criticize the more troublesome common features of the accounts.

All seem to be responding mainly to two challenges: first, a philosophical challenge, arising from atheistic existentialism, to explain how Christians can live authentically in this world despite their beliefs about the next, which seem to trivialize the prospect of death; second, a theological challenge to explain how death seals human destiny, so that the blessed will be unable to sin and the damned will be unable to repent.

Martin Heidegger posed the philosophical challenge. Recognizing that death destroys the person and hoping for nothing beyond this life, Heidegger tried to show how the prospect of death can lead a person to be decisive and to live an authentic human life. Though products of heredity and environment, human persons have creative intelligence and freedom, so that they can take possession of themselves and, within limits, decide what they will be. Even so, they tend to follow natural inclinations or waste themselves in functional relationships and the superficialities of daily life. Yet the prospect of death is an always-present part of one's life, and dread of one's own prospective utter nothingness calls one to focus on oneself in isolation from all that distracts. In definitively ending one's life, death will realize one's most personal possibility and totally isolate one. Thus, Heidegger thinks, honestly anticipated death concentrates the mind, excludes distracting possibilities, and provides a unifying principle for living a unique life. The life of someone who accepts this principle has a definite purpose: to exercise freedom in opting for a limited set of possibilities. Thus, authentic living *toward* death frees one to live a whole or complete life in which one creatively makes, if not *the most* of oneself, at least *something* of oneself.²⁰

Plainly, according to Heidegger's view, Christian hope negates the existential value of death and facilitates evasion of the responsibility to live authentically. The theologians who responded to this challenge uniformly rejected Heidegger's individualistic ideal of self-fulfillment and affirmed the truth of

¹⁹ The accounts being summarized are: MERSCH E., *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, St. Louis: B. Herder, 1951: 262-270; GLEASON R.W., "Toward a Theology of Death," *Thought* 1957, 32: 39-68; RAHNER K., *On the Theology of Death*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1961; TROISFONTAINES R., *I Do Not Die*, New York: Desclee, 1963; BOROS L., *The Mystery of Death*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1965.

²⁰ HEIDEGGER M., . *Being and Time*, New York: Harper and Row, 1962: 279-311.

faith that human fulfillment is to be found only in communion with God and others, a communion that requires genuine mutual self-giving and other-accepting. Some of the theologians also mention what all of them surely would affirm: that by the free and self-determining act of baptismal faith, the Christian, empowered by the Holy Spirit, has died and risen with Christ – that is, has given up his or her unauthentic self for the sake of authentic self-possession and self-realization.²¹ Again, some take into account and none denies that carrying out the baptismal undertaking requires Christians continually to die to self by putting to death the deeds of the flesh so as to live toward death with the hope of rising with Christ to everlasting life.²² And all surely would agree that, when Christians become aware of their own impending death, they should humbly accept the inevitable as God's will and prepare themselves to receive his judgment.

But for the theologians who proposed innovative accounts of death, these considerations, by themselves, did not seem an adequate response to the challenge to show that Christian faith does not trivialize death. They felt it necessary to try to explain how the death that seemingly happens to human beings much as it does to other organisms *directly* engages a person's freedom. So, extrapolating from the human experience of the interplay throughout life of freedom and of necessity – that is, of all that is beyond one's control – they posit an exercise of freedom in the very moment of death itself, and maintain that a human person not only suffers death but does it.²³

For these theologians, then, death is an act. Moreover, it is not simply one act among others: "The all-important act of our earthly life is its very last act, whereby *becoming* yields its place to *being*. It is the act of death".²⁴ No prior act is so truly one's own: "Death is man's first completely personal act".²⁵ It is not simply acquiescing in the inevitable: "In an act of such decision it appears possible that the personal freedom of the composite person could be engaged to an extent hitherto unrealized".²⁶ For the act of death fulfills the

²¹ Cf. GLEASON, "Toward a Theology of Death", p. 62.

²² *Ibid.*; cf. RAHNER, *On the Theology of Death*, pp. 64-88.

²³ *Ibid.*, 51-53, differs from the other authors by holding that the consummating exercise of freedom occurs, not precisely at death, but throughout life. So, for him it is not a *final* option but rather a *fundamental* option. For the reasons why that view is theologically unsound, see JOHN PAUL II, *Veritatis splendor*, n. 65-68, AAS 1993, 85: 1184-88; GRISEZ G., *The Way of the Lord Jesus. I. Christian Moral Principles*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983: 382-390.

²⁴ TROISFONTAINES, *I Do Not Die*, p. 149.

²⁵ BOROS, *The Mystery of Death*, p. 84 (emphasis omitted).

²⁶ GLEASON, "Toward Theology of Death", p. 64.

acting person precisely as such: "This act has to be free, as its very essence shows; it is the passage of a free being to the definitive stage which its liberty has prepared".²⁷ In sum, in the opinion of these theologians, Heidegger's challenge is adequately answered by their conception of death: "As the end of man, who is a spiritual person, it [death] is an active consummation from within brought about by the person himself. It is a growing up, the result of what man has made of himself during this life, the achievement of total self-possession. It is the real self-creation, the fullness of his freely exercised personal reality".²⁸

For Heidegger, however, the prospect of death puts human freedom to work on the realization of this-worldly possibilities, while for the theologians who regard death as consummation from within, the act's object is the person's eternal destiny: either fulfillment in heavenly communion or isolation in defiant autonomy. Either option, they suggest, somehow resolves the tensions among all the tentative, particular choices an individual has made during his or her life, gathers them up, and definitively completes them.²⁹ Thus, they hold, the blessed cannot sin because their free act of death completely determines them to heavenly communion, and the damned cannot repent because their free act of death completely determines them to defiant autonomy. In this way, these theologians think, their theory responds also to the theological challenge to explain how death seals human destiny.

This conception of death as a consummating option is theologically unsound for at least two reasons.³⁰

First, it is a matter of faith that humankind's first parents suffered death as a punishment for their sin, and that even their descendants who commit no personal sin (except Jesus and Mary) inherit original sin and face death as its

²⁷ MERSCH, *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, p. 265.

²⁸ RAHNER, *On the Theology of Death*, p. 39.

²⁹ See MERSCH, *On the Theology of Death*, pp. 266-269; GLEASON, "Toward Theology of Death," pp. 63-67; RAHNER, *On the Theology of Death*, pp. 37-39, 51-52; TROISFONTAINES, *I do Not Die*, pp. 150-88; BOROS, *The Mystery of Death*, pp. 85-99.

³⁰ In addition to the two considerations that will be pursued here, one might develop four others: the innovative theories lack direct support in Scripture and tradition; they tend to lessen or even negate the significance of free choices, even those made in grave matter with sufficient reflection; some if not all of these theories involve an incoherent notion of freedom, inasmuch as they project so attractive an "option" for God that nobody could prefer the alternative; and, whatever plausibility talk about a consummating act of death has in reference to people who have engaged in human acts, such talk is entirely implausible in reference to individuals who die without ever having made any free choice.

punishment.³¹ Now, for anything to be a punishment, it must be repugnant to those who experience it. But nobody finds repugnant the exercise of his or her own freedom. Therefore, death cannot be a consummating exercise of freedom.

The theologians who claim that death is such an exercise respond by distinguishing between death as destruction from without and death as consummation from within, and by saying that sinless humankind would have engaged in the latter without undergoing the former: "This end of man in Paradise, a death without dying, would have been a pure, apparent and active consummation of the whole man by an inward movement, free of death in the proper sense, that is, without suffering any violent dissolution of his actual bodily constitution through a power from without".³²

But this answer raises further questions. If active consummation would have occurred in Paradise without death in the proper sense, why should the comparable act of fallen humans be regarded as the act of death rather than simply as an act occasioned and conditioned by death? Again, why call an act that is free of death in the proper sense an act of "death", and why say that

³¹ See COUNCIL OF TRENT, *Decretum de peccato originale* (17 June 1546), DS 1511-12/788-89. The revealed truth that death is a punishment for original sin should not be taken to mean that God chose death and imposed it on humankind, answering evil with evil. It need only mean that, the first human beings having sinned, God does not prevent human nature from taking the course on which sin set it. Insofar as human persons are bodily and organisms are naturally corruptible, death is a natural and physically inevitable process. But it does not follow that death is good for human beings – any more than it is for the individuals of other organic species. Nor does it follow that death is intrinsically necessary for human fulfillment or that human beings would have died even had they not sinned. Some Fathers of the Church believed both that death is naturally inevitable and that it is a consequence of sin; St. Athanasius, for instance, explains: "God not only made us out of nothing, but he also gave us freely, by the grace of the Word, a life divinely oriented. But men rejected the things of eternity and, on the prompting of the devil, turned to the things of corruption. They became the cause of their own corruption in death; for, as I said before, they were by nature corruptible, but were destined, by the grace of the communion of the Word, to have escaped the consequences of nature, had they remained good. Because of the Word and his dwelling among them, even the corruption natural to them would not have affected them, as Wisdom (2.23-24) also says: "God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own nature, but through the devil's envy death entered the world" (*Oratio de incarnatione Verbi*, 5, 1-2, PG 25, 104C-105A).

³² RAHNER, *On the Theology of Death*, p. 42; and cf. pp. 54-57. In a later work, "Death," *Encyclopedia of Theology*, New York: Seabury, 1975, pp. 329-330, Rahner seems to insinuate that the "death" that is a consequence of sin is not really death but only "death as we know it now, as part of man's constitution subject to concupiscence, in darkness, weakness and obscurity regarding its actual nature"; other theologians certainly hold some such view. For an argument that such views are at odds with the truth of Catholic faith and that the alleged scientific support for them drawn from the theory of evolution or other scientific views is beside the point, see GRISEZ, *Christian Moral Principles*, pp. 346-348 and p. 358, nn. 27-28.

people in Paradise would have “died without dying?” If not simply nonsense, such talk is misleading. Plainly, it serves only one purpose: unless the consummating exercise of freedom would somehow have been death for sinless humans, it cannot be the act of death for us. Thus, the theologians who posited a consummating act of freedom would have stated their position more simply and clearly had they said, not that it is “the act of death”, but that it is an act which, for fallen humankind, is occasioned and conditioned by death.³³

At least some of those theologians would answer that in fallen humans the consummating exercise of freedom is an act of death because by it the person as a whole relinquishes life, so that the body’s activity ceases and the soul’s activity disengages itself.³⁴ But that answer would not help, for, even if the dying person freely gives up the ghost or that person’s soul freely lets go of his or her body, that act of death cannot be identified with the posited consummating option. For that hypothesized option has a different object: fulfillment in heavenly communion or isolation in defiant autonomy.

At least one of these theologians would answer that the final option precisely is to make or to refuse an ultimate act of self-surrender, to resign oneself with faith to destruction or to resist the ultimate self-emptying of death.³⁵ Initially, this might seem cogent: it makes the consummating option bear directly on death. But what sense does it really make to speak of self-surrender in the moment of death? With one’s last breath, one can commend one’s soul to God, resigning oneself to a foreseen but not yet present inevitability – “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (*Lk* 23: 46) – or one can refuse to do so. But when one is actually overtaken by death, one has no time left for acting. The time for self-surrender is past.

The second reason for the theological unsoundness of the conception of death as a consummating final option is, ironically, the very theological challenge to which these theologians were attempting to respond, namely, that people who die in God’s love can never lose it, and people who die in mortal sin can never repent.³⁶ This truth pertains to

³³ Since Rahner holds that the consummating act is a fundamental rather than a *final* option, this argument is the last one in this section meant to refer to his view.

³⁴ See MERSCH, *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, p. 265; GLEASON, “*Toward a Theology of Death*,” pp. 63-64.

³⁵ See BOROS, *The Mystery of Death*, pp. 68-81.

³⁶ RAHNER, *On the Theology of Death*, p. 35, put the truth that death seals human destiny in this way: A proposition of faith “affirms that with bodily death, man’s state of pilgrimage (to employ the

Catholic faith.³⁷ Therefore, it is theologically untenable to hold that anybody can make a final option for or against God after death.

Recognizing this problem, a proponent of the theory of final option can say that it "occurs neither before nor after death, but *in* death" and that to hold that the final option takes place after death would "be contrary to the Church's teaching on the unalterability of the state a man reaches through his death".³⁸ Thus, some proponents insist that the option pertains to the whole person, somehow including the body,³⁹ and some that it occurs in the very moment of death, which, they argue, is not yet after death.⁴⁰

But all of them, when focusing on the uniqueness of the final option by contrast with all the acts that precede it, refer to the one making the option. In doing so, they inadvertently reveal what sort of acting subject is required to make a final option. "Freedom was indispensable for the acts of earthly life, because they exercised some definite influence; surely freedom is indispensable for the act which definitely settles everything. The *personal self* was whole and free when it was confined to the body and shared in its servitudes; it must be so all the more at the moment of liberation".⁴¹ "In disengaging itself from the body, the soul freely assumes a consistent attitude to the world of values that was not realizable to this extent before. It wills as spirit what is forced upon it as body – its own temporary separation from the body".⁴² "If at the moment of separation, of death, *the soul* is active, its activity is of the same nature as that of the separate intelligences".⁴³ "In death the *individual existence* takes its place on the confines of all being, suddenly awake, in full knowledge and liberty. The hidden dynamism of existence by which a man has lived until then –

usual theological expression) comes to a definite end. Death brings man, as a moral-spiritual person, a kind of finality and consummation which renders his decision for or against God, reached during the time of his bodily life, final and unalterable".

³⁷ As is clear from the New Testament (e.g., *Lk* 16: 26; *Jn* 9: 4; 2 *Cor* 5: 10), the Church's constant and universal practice in caring for the dying; and the solemn teaching of the Second Council of Lyons, *Professio fidei Michaelis Palaeologi* (6 July 1274), DS 856-58/464; and the Council of Florence, *Decretum pro Graecis* (6 July 1439), DS 1304-6/693.

³⁸ BOROS, *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, p. 4.

³⁹ See MERSCH, *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, p. 265; GLEASON, "Toward a Theology of Death," pp. 63-64.

⁴⁰ See TROISFONTAINES, *I Do Not Die*, p. 154; BOROS, *The Mystery of Death*, pp. 4-5.

⁴¹ MERSCH, *The Theology of Mystical Body*, p. 267 (emphasis added). Note "the moment of liberation"; this phrase manifests the influence of the dualistic view criticized in section I, above.

⁴² GLEASON, "Toward a Theology of Death," p. 64 (emphasis added).

⁴³ Quoted with approval from GLORIEUX P., *Troisfontaines, I Do Not Die*, p. 157 (his emphasis deleted, mine added).

though without his ever having been able to exploit it in its fullest measure – is now brought to completion, freely and consciously”.⁴⁴

The subject of the hypothesized final option must be the *personal self* no longer confined to the body, the soul willing as spirit, the soul acting as the angels act, the *individual existence* no longer located in the physical universe. But during the time of an acting person’s life, it is not the soul that deliberates, freely chooses, and acts. Rather, it is the bodily person, alive by his or her informing soul, who acts by exercising not only spiritual capacities of intelligence and freedom but capacities of imagination, feeling, and so on – capacities that involve bodily organs. So, the subject making the supposed final option cannot be the acting person, the bodily person informed by his or her soul. Rather, the subject of such a consummatory act could only be a soul no longer informing a bodily person.

A soul no longer informing a bodily person is the surviving spiritual element of a person who has died. So, even though these theologians speak of the body’s involvement and of a final option at the very moment of death, it is clear from their references to the one making the option that it could only be made after death. But an after-death option that could change one’s eternal destiny is theologically untenable. And positing a final option that could not affect one’s eternal destiny would be theologically pointless. For such an option could not save anyone overtaken by death in unrepented mortal sin, and that possibility was what made the idea of a final option intriguing. So, the conception of death as a consummating final option is theologically unsound, being either untenable or pointless.

⁴⁴ BOROS, *The Mystery of Death*, p. viii (emphasis added). The passage goes on (viii-ix): “Man’s deepest being comes rushing towards him. With it comes all at once and all together the universe he has always borne hidden within himself, the universe with which he was already most intimately united, and which, in one way or other, was always being produced from within him. Humanity too, everywhere driven by a like force, a humanity that bears within itself, all unsuspecting, a splendour he could never have imagined, also comes rushing towards him. Being flows towards him like a boundless stream of things, meanings, persons and happenings, ready to convey him right into the Godhead. Yes; God himself stretches out his hand for him; God who, in every stirring of his existence, had been in him as his deepest mystery, from the stuff of which he had always been forming himself; God who had ever been driving him on towards an eternal destiny. There now man stands, free to accept or reject this splendour. In a last, final decision he either allows this flood of realities to flow past him, while he stands there eternally turned to stone, like a rock past which the life-giving stream flows on, noble enough in himself no doubt, but abandoned and eternally alone; or he allows himself to be carried along by this flood, becomes part of it and flows on into eternal fulfillment”. Why would anyone not allow himself or herself to be carried along into eternal fulfillment? And why would anyone who anticipated such an opportunity for cheap and easy conversion take seriously Jesus’ warnings to prepare for death?

What, then, of the challenges to which the innovative theologians of death attempted to respond: the philosophical challenge to show how Christians can live authentically and take death seriously, and the theological challenge to explain how death seals human destiny? The latter challenge was poignantly articulated by one of the innovative theologians. He considered the theory of final option the only alternative to "the puerile concept of final perseverance which seems to regard God as engaged in a whimsical game, calling one to eternity from a sort of ambush so that if one happens to be in the state of grace at the moment, so much the better for him, if not, so much the worse".⁴⁵

Clearly, the challenges were formidable for theologians imbued with a legalism that regarded this life as nothing but a probationary period and regarded moral norms as arbitrary divine commands constituting a kind of test, with heaven the reward for obedience and with hell the punishment for disobedience. So, a sound response must begin by recalling that God, who does nothing arbitrarily, acts always according to his wise and loving plan, and that moral norms articulate necessary conditions for human persons' cooperation in carrying out that plan. In God's all-embracing, providential plan, each person has a role to play: a life of good deeds prepared for him or her to walk in, a personal vocation.⁴⁶ If a person not only responds to the splendid truth about human good embodied in moral norms but discerns, accepts, and faithfully fulfills his or her unique personal vocation, that person follows the way of the Lord Jesus; contributes to God's creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work; and day by day prepares in this world material that, purified and perfected, will be found again in the eternal and universal kingdom.⁴⁷

Such a life, of course, will not meet Heidegger's standards for authenticity. But Catholic theologians, having recognized that Heidegger's this-worldly ideal of human fulfillment is incompatible with faith, should have seen the inadequacies of his standards. The lives of eminent contemporary Catholics

⁴⁵ GLEASON, "Toward a Theology of Death," p. 66; cf. RAHNER, *On the Theology of Death*, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁶ See Eph 2: 10. Recent popes and Vatican II make it clear that everyone has a personal vocation, and John Paul II richly develops this teaching in many of his documents. For references to that body of teaching and a moral theology of personal vocation, see GRISEZ, *Living a Christian Life*, pp. 104-129.

⁴⁷ See VATICAN II, *Gaudium et spes*, nn. 38-39. Unfortunately, the significance of this conciliar teaching for fundamental moral theology is overlooked by both *Veritatis splendor* and the moral section of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; that encyclical and the entire catechism also omit mention of Vatican II's and John Paul II's teaching about personal vocation.

such as Mother Teresa and John Paul II – not to mention the less familiar but no less noble devout lives of many Christians through two millennia – have hardly been frittered away in pursuing distractions and evading the challenges of being truly human. Rather than creating their own plan of life, that cloud of witnesses humbly responded to God's call and played their part in his plan. Walking by faith, none of them could understand the full meaning of his or her life or appreciate its full excellence without the anchor of hope which, extending beyond the curtain into the heavenly sanctuary,⁴⁸ does indeed rob death of the existential ultimacy and majesty it has from Heidegger's point of view. But his point of view plainly was profoundly flawed: Heidegger opted for Nazism.⁴⁹

God does not cut off anyone's life arbitrarily. Despite any imperfections and repented infidelities, those who are saved by grace complete the work assigned them in God's plan and only then die: their lives are his handiwork, and the divine artist rests only when he finishes a master work.⁵⁰ To those who are not saved, God gives sufficient grace – everything they need – to walk in the life of good deeds he offers them. But, despite whatever human value their lives involve, on some occasion, perhaps many occasions, they consider doing something gravely wrong, realize that they ought not to do it, yet freely choose to do it; and although before death they may consider repenting, they freely choose to put off doing so – or choose not to do so at all. So, one should not imagine that they merely *happen* not to be in the state of grace when death overtakes them. Nor is there anything whimsical in God's treatment of them. His plan includes permitting and using their lives

⁴⁸ See *Heb 6: 19*.

⁴⁹ This argument is not *ad hominem*. As WOLIN R., *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 16-130, Heidegger's philosophy, not requiring any specific option, did not require him to opt for Nazism; but, not being a sound philosophy, Heidegger's anthropology-ethics both failed to rule out Nazism and disposed him to decide for it. The even-handed work of SAFRANSKI R., *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 225-306, confirms both the depth of Heidegger's commitment to Nazism and the commitment's roots in his philosophy.

⁵⁰ Though nothing escapes God's providence, one who considers people's deaths from the point of view of secondary causes and surviving dependents' concerns must say that some deaths should (in various senses) not have occurred – deaths due to others' wrongdoing or negligence, untimely deaths of young children's parents, and so on. Prudent pastors both promptly acknowledge the immanent situations grieving survivors face and compassionately support their efforts to deal reasonably with those situations. At the same time, such pastors avoid glib pieties and carefully discern the right moment, which may be days or weeks after the funeral, to offer consolation by urging hope in God's mercy, recalling his providence, and encouraging resignation to his loving plan.

for the benefit of others and the kingdom as a whole. Thus, when such people die, they have, though unwittingly, served God's good purposes in causing them to live and in tolerating their abuse of the capacity to make free choices.

I do not think revelation tells us how death seals human destiny, and I am not sure that speculation on the matter is likely to be fruitful. But the personality development of those recognized as great saints is suggestive. They become single-minded and single-hearted, so that almost all their thoughts and opinions are consistent with their faith, and almost all their choices implement their hope, which is their intention of the kingdom as ultimate end. Their feelings and behavioral dispositions become more and more harmonious with their minds and hearts. And so, loving with nearly their whole minds, hearts, souls, and strength, they serve others in obedience to God's creative, redemptive, and sanctifying plan and will. Thus, notable sanctity comes about through the integration of virtually all the other elements of a human person's complex reality with the gift of faith and the love of God poured forth in his or her heart.⁵¹

The separated soul has less to integrate than a bodily person does: feelings and behavioral dispositions no longer are in play. And, even in this life, thoughts and intentions can be inconsistent only so long as the inconsistency is not directly focused upon. Perhaps the separated soul is incapable of inattention and self-deception, or perhaps it is helped to resolve its inconsistencies, so that its spiritual life becomes fully integrated. This would require no new choice of its own and no extraordinary divine act. Through this process, the souls of those who die in God's love could be purged and perfected in holiness, while other souls were integrated around the dominant elements of the world views and intentions that replace faith and hope when people violate charity. Given complete integration, holy souls would no longer be subject to temptation from within,⁵² and those lacking charity would no longer be able to take an interest in anything that would give them a reason to repent.

⁵¹ ST. THOMAS, *De perfectione vitae spiritualis*, 5, explains that to love God with one's whole heart is to order one's entire life to the service of God, with one's whole mind is to subject one's intellect entirely to faith in God's word, with one's whole soul is to relate all one's affection to God and to love all else in him, and with one's whole strength is to perform all outward words and deeds out of love.

⁵² The blessed also will be free of temptation from without, for the kingdom will not present temptations as the (fallen) world does, and Satan no longer will be permitted to harass God's children.

Nor need the resurrection of the body alter either group's situation. True, resurrection will re-create bodily persons in all their human complexity, but each person will rise in his or her very own body, perfectly adapted to his or her unique spiritual life of God-given holiness or self-determined depravity.

DEATH AS GOOD IN ITSELF IF DUE TO AN ACT MOTIVATED BY CHARITY (Section III)

Out of love for his heavenly Father and for us, Jesus laid down his life; out of love for God and neighbor, Christian martyrs have followed Jesus in laying down their lives. Not only were Jesus and the martyrs morally upright and holy in this, but in some real and important sense, their deaths were good: Jesus' death was salvific, and martyrs' deaths have been the seed of faith. Plainly, too, many devout Christians have considered their own prospective deaths a good to be hoped for: they have prayed for death, just as for other blessings. From these facts some will infer that death motivated by charity is not something bad but rather something good in itself. And in some cases, they will go on to argue, charity apparently motivates the choice to end one's own or another's life. For example, some compassionately choose to die to spare others the trouble and expense of caring for them, and some compassionately choose to kill someone who has no prospect of gaining or regaining good health and a normal life in order to spare that person (and others) the suffering involved in and consequent upon his or her miserable life. Therefore, those proposing the argument will conclude, killing motivated by compassion can be called euthanasia in a true sense and is justified inasmuch as the death it brings about is good.

Though the premises leading to the final conclusion of the preceding argument may seem true, the conclusion is decisively falsified by the Catholic Church's moral teaching excluding euthanasia, for that teaching surely is true and unchangeable.⁵³ So, the argument as a whole must be unsound. Its

⁵³ See JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, nn. 64-66, AAS 1995, 87: 474-478, refers to Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium*, n. 25 (where the conditions for the infallibility of the ordinary Magisterium are articulated) and the encyclical's accompanying text (at the end of 65) states: "This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium". That statement together with the reference to *Lumen gentium*, n. 25, implies that the teaching excluding euthanasia has been proposed infallibly – see CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the "Professio fidei"*, n. 11, *L'Osservatore Romano* (English), 15 July 1998, p. 4.

unsoundness is due to several confusions and shifts of meaning, all of which can be cleared up by careful reflection. I shall begin with the confusions in the second half of the argument.

One of these concerns compassion. In many places in the Old Testament, God is said to be compassionate, and his people often appeal to his compassion. Though the words used perhaps signify feelings of sympathy, when said of God they refer not to emotions, which cannot be ascribed to him, but to an aspect of divine perfection: God's mercy, which is the form his faithful love takes in overcoming evil.⁵⁴ In the New Testament, Jesus' actions often are said to be motivated by compassion,⁵⁵ and here the word plainly does refer to his human feelings. However, Jesus always subordinated every feeling, including compassion, to his commitment to do the Father's will. So, Jesus' compassion was integrated with and governed by his merciful human and divine love.

Thus, *compassion* has two meanings. In one sense it refers to a virtue – mercy – and in another sense to an emotion. As a virtue, mercy is morally good and disposes one only to do what is right. As an emotion, compassionate feeling is neither morally good nor evil in itself. It is simply a natural response of human beings, who are not isolated from one another, as individualists suppose, but are mutually interdependent members of an extended family.

Though the natural feeling of compassion is not morally good or evil in itself, it is morally significant in two ways. First, compassionate feeling integrated with mercy, as it was in Jesus, shares in the virtue's goodness, while the lack of appropriate compassionate feeling, heartlessness, manifests moral immaturity, selfishness, or even hatred. Second, compassionate feeling which is not integrated with mercy often inclines people to act unreasonably – and so immorally, even if blamelessly due to lack of sufficient reflection. The unreasonable response can be of different sorts. Very often, people moved by compassion omit fulfilling responsibilities so as to avoid inflicting pain or hardship. Sometimes, though lacking adequate skill or resources, people compassionately try to help others, and the well-meaning effort only makes matters worse. Again, and even more seriously, those driven by feelings of compassion for people who are obviously suffering sometimes condone or take part in serious injustices.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See SPICQ C., *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994: I: 471-479.

⁵⁵ See *Mt* 9: 36, 14: 14, 15: 32, 20: 34; *Mk* 6: 34, 8: 2; *Lk* 7: 13.

⁵⁶ BLUM L.A., *Moral Perception and Particularity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994: 173-182, provides a phenomenology of compassion considered as an emotional attitude, and points

Thus, unless integrated with the virtue of mercy, compassionate feelings may fail to bring practical wisdom into play and all too often lead to the folly of trying to achieve good by doing evil. That is precisely what happens when compassion moves people to commit suicide in order to spare others or to kill others, at their request or not, in order to end their suffering.

The moral ambiguity of compassionate feelings often is overlooked today. Contemporary culture has been influenced by secularism, which usually regards altruistic sentiments as a sound guide to right and wrong. Pain and suffering are widely regarded not only as intrinsically evil but as the worst evils, while pleasure and enjoyment are regarded as intrinsically good and even as the highest goods. Morality often is reduced to doing what one can to minimize pain and suffering and to maximize pleasure and enjoyment. Many people who do not believe in God find this view congenial because it locates the ultimate principles of morality in human experience rather than beyond it. Many also like the way it displaces traditional morality's focus on intelligible, fundamental goods – fidelity, marriage itself, human life – and makes way for a permissive new morality regarding sex, marriage, and killing. Even some believers now fail to distinguish the feeling of compassion from the virtue of mercy and uncritically accept secularist ideas.⁷⁷

Keeping this distinction in mind, however, one can easily see that, even if motivated by feelings of compassion, a choice to kill oneself or another is no exercise of charity but rather is gravely contrary to it. As was explained in section I above, life is a person's concrete reality and death is his or her ceasing to be; a choice to kill a person is therefore a choice to destroy him or her. But charity creates, sustains, nurtures, and cherishes; it never destroys. Therefore, loving self and neighbor with charity and acting with authentic mercy, one never will choose to kill oneself or anyone else.

out (p. 182): "Compassion can also be misguided, grounded in superficial understanding of a situation. Compassion is not necessarily wise or appropriate. The compassionate person may even end up doing more harm than good". BATSON C.D. ET AL., *Immorality from Empathy-Induced Altruism: When Compassion and Justice Conflict*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1995, 68: 1042-1054, report experiments showing that people stirred to compassionate feelings manifested partiality in allocating resources in a way they themselves admitted to be less fair and less moral than the alternative chosen by the control group.

⁷⁷ The preceding analysis of compassion draws on, but freely recasts and develops, helpful insights of PELLEGRINO E., *The Moral Status of Compassion in Bioethics: The Sacred and the Secular*, *Ethics and Medics*, 1995, 9 (20), pp. 3-4.

Does it follow that one always must do everything possible to sustain life and may never do anything that will bring about anyone's death? Not at all. To see why, one must understand the structure of morally significant human actions, which carry out free choices.

In making a choice, one generally chooses to do something. If one can and should do something but chooses not to do it, the adoption of that proposal also is a human action – an act of omission – but for simplicity's sake I shall not repeatedly mention omissions here. Before choosing, individuals deliberate about options they consider possible and interesting – I could do this or that – much as a deliberative body debates options proposed in members' motions. A choice to do something adopts a proposal just as a group's vote does, and in both cases the action is completed by carrying out what is decided. One's specifically human action is the unified whole: the choice by which one adopts a proposal together with (and shaping) the behavior by which one carries it out.

Since the carrying out of the choice is what is proposed by the acting person, carrying it out is the immediate goal of his or her choosing (the acting person's "proximate end"). The acting person's purpose in adopting the proposal also is an end – the real or apparent good hoped for in making the choice (the *end in view*). (In many cases, a person has more than one end in view. Here and in what follows, end refers to those cases as well). Thus, in choosing to do an action, a person can be said to intend both the choice's execution and the end in view. But *intend* also can be contrasted with choose and used to refer exclusively to the willing of ends in view, whether intermediate or ultimate. And the execution of the choice can be thought of, not as the proximate end of choosing, but only as a means of pursuing the end in view.

In any case, acting persons do not do everything that results from their actions. Whenever carrying out a choice involves outward behavior, that behavior has effects neither included in the acting person's proposal nor in his or her end in view. For example, taking medication for an allergy may cause drowsiness. Sometimes, such effects are not foreseen; but even if they are, they are not part of the person's action. Rather, they are side effects of it. Still, since an action's foreseen side effects could be avoided by not choosing to do the action, a person who makes a choice while foreseeing that carrying it out will have side effects freely accepts those side effects and, in doing the action, knowingly brings them about. So, people bear some responsibility for their actions' side effects, and that responsi-

bility is easily confused with their responsibility for choices they reluctantly make.⁵⁸

With this explanation in mind, one can see that a person can bring about someone's death without choosing to kill or intending death as an end in view, but only accepting death as a side effect. Doing that can be wrong. For example, without intending to kill, one might wrongly bring about one's own death by abusing drugs, or another's death by stealing something that person needs for survival.

But one also might rightly bring about one's own or another's death as a side effect of an upright choice. For example, if no better means of easing the suffering of a dying patient is available and sedation will not prevent him or her from fulfilling exigent responsibilities, the narcotics necessary to suppress the patient's pain may be administered so as to suppress it, even if it is foreseen that doing so will have the side effect of shortening life.⁵⁹ Contrast that action with a homicidal choice in an empirically similar situation: desiring to shorten life so as to eliminate pain (and perhaps other burdens) but wishing to leave no evidence of suicide or homicide, someone might choose to use the same analgesics – perhaps, but not necessarily, in a larger dose.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Even God foresees and accepts evils that he does not choose: see COUNCIL OF TRENT, *Decretum de iustificatione* (13 Jan. 1547), canon 6, DS 1556/816; ST. THOMAS, *Summa theologiae*, 1, q. 22, a. 2, ad 2; q. 49, a. 2; 1-2, q. 79, aa. 2-4; *Id.*, *Summa contra gentiles*, 1.96, 3.71. If one rejects the proposition that God foresees and freely accepts evils without intending any evil as an end or as a chosen means, then one must, if consistent, deny at least one of three propositions, all of which pertain to faith: that God's will is perfectly holy, that his providence is all-embracing, and that some creatures have sinned with the result that evil is real. So, accepting bad side effects can be compatible with good will. But choosing what is bad or having a bad end in view is never compatible with good will, because making a choice is self-determining with respect to everything included in the proposal adopted by that choice. Still, agents who wrongly accept side effects often have chosen previously to violate the good involved or in the course of deliberation have made a procedural choice to disregard the interests of the person or persons who will be adversely affected, and so have determined themselves wrongly. Thus, though the distinction between rightly accepting a bad side effect and choosing what would bring about the same state of affairs is morally crucial, there often is little if any moral significance to the distinction between wrongly accepting a bad side effect and choosing what will bring about the same bad state of affairs.

⁵⁹ See JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, n. 65, AAS 1995, 87: 476, reaffirming a point already clarified by Pius XII and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

⁶⁰ Though the person making that homicidal choice might claim to intend only to eliminate pain (and perhaps other burdens), he or she also would intend to kill: the shortening of life would be the agent's intermediate end in view, sought not for its own sake but as a means to the ulterior, declared end.

Similarly, a choice not to do everything possible to keep someone alive can be homicidal, but also can be morally acceptable and even obligatory. Suppose, for example, a baby is born with severe abnormalities including a life-threatening heart defect, for which the attending pediatrician recommends surgery. If the parents, wanting only normal children, decide to refuse the surgery so that this baby will die, their choice is homicidal. But parents of a similar baby might well be justified in accepting the child's death as a side effect of caring for him or her as best they can while forgoing the surgery so as to avoid burdens that they need not, and perhaps ought not, accept. Available health care personnel and facilities may be deficient, so that the prospect of the surgery's success might be low; the parents may be poor, so that paying for the surgery would deprive their other children of necessities. Not obtaining the surgery in such cases would not carry out a homicidal choice. The child's death due to the unrepaired heart defect would be the side effect of a choice – probably morally good and perhaps even obligatory – to use available resources in other ways of caring for that child and the others.

It is worth noticing that in some cases people using ordinary language or legal terminology speak of a death that was not intended, in the ethical sense I have just explained, as “intentional”, meaning foreseen and voluntarily brought about. For example, if the owner of a failing business set fire to his shop in order to collect the insurance, not expecting the night watchman to escape the flames, many people who learned of the crime and some courts would say that the watchman's death was intentionally brought about by the arsonist, even though that death was neither anything he chose nor any purpose he had in view. However, such other legitimate ways of talking about action do not invalidate the distinction I have explained, though they do underline the importance of bearing in mind two things: 1. that in the sense of intends explained here, one intends only what one chooses to do or has as an intermediate or ultimate purpose in making a choice; and 2. that people who foresee and wrongly accept bad side effects cannot truthfully excuse their immorality by saying that what they did was “unintentional” – meaning unforeseen and/or involuntary.

Some who accept the preceding explanation nevertheless will argue that the distinction between what one intends and what one accepts as a side effect cannot explain how publicly authorized killing in war and as capital punishment, which most Christians have considered morally acceptable, can be justified. Since the law of charity requires love even of enemies, does not

Christians' approval of capital punishment and war show that choosing to kill people is compatible with loving them?

It is true that most Christians, denying or ignoring the incompatibility between choosing to kill wrongdoers or aggressors and loving them, have supposed that under certain conditions public officials were justified in ordering people to be killed in wars and as capital punishment. Most Christians' reflection about the matter focused, not on the good of human life, but on the supremacy of divine law. They thought that God's commandment forbidding killing protected only the innocent, and that God had directed public authorities to safeguard the common good by intentionally killing those who wrongly threatened it. During the present century, however, authentic theological development has made it clear that God's negative commandments protect fundamental human goods, and papal teaching has endorsed that development.⁶¹

Accordingly, the popes increasingly focused on the limits of the legitimate use of deadly force by public authorities. Pius XII took a crucial step in maintaining that only defensive wars can be justified.⁶² Recently, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has used morally acceptable individual self-defense, in which the death of an aggressor is not intended but only accepted as a side effect, as the model for the legitimate use of deadly force by public officials.⁶³ So, the *Catechism* offers only one sort of reason why public authorities might be justified in authorizing lethal military actions and in executing criminals. In the former case, it says: "The defense of the common good requires that an *unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm*"; in the latter, it says: "Assuming that the guilty party's identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, *if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor*".⁶⁴ Thus, Catholic teaching now indi-

⁶¹ See, e.g., JOHN PAUL II, *Veritatis splendor*, n. 48 and n. 50, *AAS* 1993, 85: 1171-1172 and 1173-1174; ID., *Evangelium Vitae*, nn. 75-77, *AAS* 1995, 87: 488-490.

⁶² PIUS XII, *Christmas Message* (24 Dec. 1944), *AAS* 1945, 37; ID., *Catholic Mind*, 43 (Feb. 1945), p. 72, teaches that there is a duty to ban "wars of aggression as legitimate solutions of international disputes and as a means toward realizing national aspirations"; ID., *Christmas Message* (24 Dec. 1948), *AAS* 1949, 41: 12-13; ID., *Catholic Mind*, 47, p. 184, Pius XII also teaches: "Every war of aggression against those goods which the Divine plan for peace obliges men unconditionally to respect and guarantee, and accordingly to protect and defend, is a sin, a crime, and an outrage against the majesty of God, the Creator and Ordainer of the world".

⁶³ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2263.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, *editio typica* n. 2265 (war) and n. 2267 (capital punishment), emphasis added.

cates that even publicly authorized killing cannot rightly carry out a choice to kill. Therefore, the teachings on killing in war and as capital punishment no longer provide reasons for holding that intentionally killing someone can be compatible with charity.

Having clarified the confusions in the second half of the argument for euthanasia set out at the beginning of this section, I turn now to confusions in the argument's first half, which led to the claim that death motivated by charity is good in itself. That claim was based on a particular understanding of several facts: Jesus laid down his life out of love, and his death was salvific; Christian martyrs also have laid down their lives, and their deaths have helped spread the faith; and devout Christians seem to consider death good inasmuch as they hope and pray for it. These facts raise two questions. First, did Jesus and the martyrs consider death good, and do devout Christians who pray for death consider it good? Second, did Jesus and the martyrs *intend* their deaths in laying down their lives, and do devout Christians *intend* their deaths in praying for death?

As I have shown in section I, above, a person's dying is the loss of his or her concrete reality – is his or her ceasing to be – which cannot be good in itself. Still, one's prospective death can seem good, and reflection on various ways in which death can come to seem good will help answer the two questions.

Prospective death can seem good insofar as it seems to offer a possible way of avoiding ongoing suffering. This is how nonbelievers who choose to kill themselves or others, as euthanasia, regard death. Not regarding life as good in itself but as a necessary condition for enjoyable experience (and, perhaps, other goods), they consider life no longer good when it has served its purpose. Death, likewise, seems to them neither good nor bad in itself, but bad if it robs someone of still-useful life and good if it ends "useless" life and suffering.

At the emotional level, there are no distinctions between means and ends, between what is good in itself and what is good by reference to something else. Whatever is perceived or imagined either does or does not elicit desire and promise satisfaction, and whatever does so, seems good. But since death itself, the person's ceasing to be, is unimaginable, in trying to imagine their own deaths, people imagine themselves somehow surviving, perhaps dualistically as an ethereal self flying happily away, but probably more often as a hidden but still-living person – as in the image resentful children form of watching their own funeral and enjoying their parents' grief. When devout Chris-

tians imagine their own death, they picture themselves reaching heaven: perhaps being admitted by Peter, ushered into a private audience with the Lord Jesus, and then rejoining loved ones. Therefore, though perceptions or images connected with death usually elicit fear or anger, one's own imagined death can and often does seem good.

At the intellectual level, a death – that is, someone's *dying*, not his or her being dead – can seem humanly good due to the human values that lead to it and flow from it, without seeming good either as an end to be intended or as a means to be chosen. For example, the death of a fireman resulting from a successful attempt to rescue a four-year-old girl from her flaming home is, in a true sense, beautiful and good. While the fireman perhaps deliberately risked death, he did not choose to die; if he foresaw the fire's lethal effect, he knew it would contribute nothing to the rescue. His death draws its goodness from his heroism and from the life he saved. Yet these reasons for the goodness of the fireman's death also are reasons for wishing he had not died: his death is no benefit but a tragedy for him and a great loss to his loved ones and the community. So, even while contemplating this heroic death with admiration and joy, survivors bitterly grieve over it and, perhaps, seek ways of making it more likely that firemen doing their duty in the future will not only succeed but survive.

When the fireman began to carry the little girl through the flames, she no doubt found the prospect of being exposed to them both terrifying and good. Why good? Because it was an obviously and absolutely necessary condition for reaching safety in her parents' arms. Still, for her, being exposed to the flames was not a means of escape: she had no choice and did nothing to bring it about. But even if she had anticipated the rescue and called for help, she need not have chosen to be exposed to the flames as a means to safety, for she could have accepted that as an inseparable part of being rescued – of being delivered from a hopeless situation into her parents' arms.

The child's thinking in this way about going through the flames is also the way in which devout Christians can and, I believe, often do think of death. They do not regard death – the loss of their concrete reality – as a possible means to anything. On the contrary, they realize that it is a punishment for original sin and will remain a great evil until the end of time: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death".⁶⁵ So, such Christians do not imagine that killing themselves could benefit them. But they do think that undergoing death is an inseparable

⁶⁵ 1 Cor 15: 26.

arable part of being saved, reaching heaven, being raised up in eternal life.⁶⁶ Thus, when they pray for death, devout Christians really are praying for their integral salvation. They explicitly focus on death for the same reason that the little girl might cry out: "Carry me through the flames!" That inseparable part of being rescued must come first in time; being associated with safety, it arouses a desire powerful enough to overcome terror.

Someone will object that the foregoing analogy is imperfect. When we ask others to do something for us, we intend their action as an intermediate end that will be a means to some further end in view; and praying for death is asking God to bring it about so as to reach heaven: "Lord, I think I have lived long enough; please take back my life". Therefore, it seems, in praying for death devout Christians do intend that God act to end their lives – in other words, they intend that God kill them.

Perhaps some do. If so, they confusedly intend their own death, which objectively is wrong. Yet they are guiltless not only because they lack sufficient reflection but because they mean to submit to God and assume that his act of killing will be good. Interestingly, though, devout Christians praying for death seldom seem to think of themselves as asking God to kill them. A common way of praying for death, "Please let me die", suggests that the anticipated death would be a side effect of God's doing something other than killing. "Please exchange my present life for resurrection life" perhaps best expresses the attitude of devout Christians.

In any case, though God's plan includes one's death, God neither can nor needs to bring it about by an act of killing. He cannot kill, because killing is destructive while his intention in acting always is loving and creative; he need not kill, because creatures never are independently existing things confronting God but always are entirely contingent on his mind and will. So, death comes to a human being when God ceases to sustain his or her life, and God's not indefinitely sustaining people's lives is a side effect of his unique act of creating, redeeming, and sanctifying the created universe.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ That plainly is the view of St. Paul – see 2 Cor 5: 1-10 – and of the funeral liturgy's "life is changed, not ended" (*The Roman Missal: The Sacramentary*, "Preface of Christian Death I"). By contrast with Paul's explicit wish for resurrection – not to be unclothed but to be fully clothed – *life is changed, not ended* might seem to express a dualistic outlook. But in context it too clearly manifests Christian hope in bodily resurrection, which overcomes the evil of death by restoring the bodily person to immortal life.

⁶⁷ Bear in mind that God foresees and accepts evils that he does not choose: see note 58, above. We *rightly* "play God" in bringing about death when we compassionately choose not to provide extraordinary treatment to sustain life, not when we choose out of compassionate feelings to kill.

The preceding clarifications are easily applied to the death of martyrs.

On the one hand, as human values lead to and flow from the heroic fireman's dying, so important values lead to and flow from martyrs' dying. But whereas most of the benefits of the fireman's heroism would have been realized even had he survived, the martyrs' very dying greatly contributes to the effectiveness of their witness. Then too, a martyr's death is better than the death of a hero who lays down his or her life for goods lesser than loyalty and obedience to God. For the martyr plainly manifests not only natural virtues but the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. All this, of course, generally is recognized by martyrs themselves, and it provides their main reason for laying down their lives. Moreover, confidently anticipating heavenly happiness, martyrs often emotionally exult in their suffering and dying.

On the other hand, Christian martyrs, for the most part very clearly, do not choose to do anything *in order to get* themselves killed, but only accept death as a side effect. Many use every morally acceptable means to avoid being killed, and accept death only when they see no alternative except to sin. Even those who could refrain without sinning from the act that brings about their death, generally choose to do the act for the sake of its immediate good effect, and only accept death as an inevitable and foreseen side effect: St. Maximilian Kolbe saved the other man by taking his place, which involved accepting death as a bad side effect. If Kolbe had miraculously survived several weeks longer than he did and allied forces had liberated the camp soon enough to save him, that would not have frustrated his intent in taking the other man's place.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ RAHNER, *On the Theology of Death*, unfortunately fails to make the necessary distinctions and says (p. 119) that for the martyr, death "has been in itself the object of free decision" and "death is loved for its own sake"; and concludes (p. 120): "In Christian martyrdom, it is death itself that is the theme. Death is not something which is merely accepted, since it has been a stubbornly pursued goal, but it is something that is loved in itself, a sharing in our Lord's death, the blessed gate of eternal life". Thus, Rahner, mistakenly supposing that martyrs' intentions are defined by their emotional attitudes and by their reasons for gladly *accepting* death, neglects to ask whether typical Christian martyrs choose to kill themselves or have dying in view as an intermediate or ultimate end in choosing something else. Moreover, with a conception of human freedom influenced by Heidegger, Rahner thinks of the martyr's death as a sort of paradigmatic thematization of a sound fundamental option (see pp. 89-104) and supposes that for this reason such a death must be voluntary in the strongest possible sense: not accepted as a side effect but wholeheartedly chosen (see pp. 104-118). Though Rahner does not say so, that would mean that martyrdom is a type of suicide. Following logically enough from Rahner's theory, that conclusion manifests the theory's unsoundness.

Of course, some martyrs do *appear* to have intended to die. For example, St. Ignatius of Antioch, a bishop condemned to death for his faith during the reign of Trajan (98-117 A.D.), sent a letter to the Christians at Rome as he was being brought there for execution. In it he wrote: "I am writing to all the Churches and I enjoin all, that I am dying willingly for God's sake, if only you do not prevent it. I beg of you, do not do me an untimely kindness. Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, which are my way of reaching to God. I am God's wheat, and I am to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become the pure bread of Christ".⁶⁹

Despite appearances, St. Ignatius in writing this passage may well have meant only to warn his fellow Christians against trying to save his life by actions that would be either intrinsically wrong (such as lying or compromising the Church's teaching) or gravely imprudent (such as unduly risking their own or others' lives or provoking the public authorities to persecute the Church more severely). If such intentions were the only ones Ignatius had in writing, he did not intend to die but only accepted death.

Still, one might consider that interpretation implausible and hold that, intending to die as a means of reaching God, Ignatius plainly chose to dissuade fellow Christians from doing what they might reasonably have done to prevent his death. According to that view, in intending that others not act to save him, Ignatius intended his own death, though without the accurate understanding of what he was doing that would have made it a mortal sin of suicide rather than the act of charity it was.⁷⁰

What is true of most if not of all martyrs also is true of the king of martyrs, our Lord Jesus. His very dying flowed from and led to great goods: it was the consummate act of his divine and human redeeming love, and it is salvific for fallen humankind. Since Jesus laid down his life to save us, his death cannot be called "unintentional" as if it were in no way voluntary; he clearly did foresee and freely accept his death. Yet Jesus did not choose to do anything *in order* to bring about his own death nor did he intend his death as a means to our salvation or anything else. Rather, at an early age he committed himself always to do nothing but his Father's will, and he faithfully fulfilled that commitment by carrying out the mission he was given.⁷¹ Seeking to

⁶⁹ St. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Letter to the Romans*, 4, 1.

⁷⁰ The same must be said of the death of Razis (see 2 *Mac* 14: 37-46). By contrast, Eleazar's heroic death (see 1 *Mac* 6: 43-46) plainly was not suicide but only a foreseen and freely accepted side effect of effective defensive military action against an enemy.

⁷¹ *Luke* 2: 41-52 portrays Jesus at twelve already clear about what he was to do, and doing it.

gather Israel together as the nucleus of the new covenantal community, which is the beginning of the everlasting kingdom of God, realizing that his effort was not bearing fruit, and foreseeing that he would be killed, Jesus nevertheless obediently went up to Jerusalem to *inaugurate the kingdom*. And at the Last Supper he did inaugurate it, while freely accepting as a side effect of doing so the death he would suffer the next day.⁷²

This act, which includes Jesus' laying down his life without intending his death, accomplished humankind's reconciliation with God. On the one hand, that sacrificial act of self-giving consummated his life of perfect human love for the Father, and the sacrifice not only would last forever but, through the sacraments, would be available for those who heard and accepted the gospel to cooperate with and share in.⁷³ On the other hand, by his passion and death Jesus bore incontrovertible witness to his boundless and indiscriminate human love for each and every person on earth, and by his resurrection bore similar witness to the Father's love for him and for the many who would listen to him, join with him, follow him, and abide in him – and, by doing so, enter into Jesus' divine communion with the Father and their Holy Spirit.

Admittedly, this way of understanding Jesus' death is inconsistent with many received theological notions about its redemptive efficacy and seems inconsistent with some New Testament texts.⁷⁴ But I believe that this interpretation is consistent with all that the Church has firmly and constantly taught, and recent, competent exegesis supports it: "In fact, Jesus did not search out death as a means for the salvation of human persons; he accepted death, in sorrow and in submission, as the crowning of his life of faithfulness. Jesus was faithful to the mission received from his Father, that of proclaiming the Good News concerning the God of compassion and concerning love for the brethren. He maintained this stance against enemies who wanted to silence him, by not defending himself with violent

⁷² See GRISEZ, *Christian Moral Principles*, pp. 532-542, 553-555, 791-793.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 732-733, and the passages referred to therein.

⁷⁴ For example, the verse, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" (*Lk* 12: 50), seems to say that Jesus intends his death rather than only accepts it. But the very next verse, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" (*Lk* 12: 51), even more clearly seems to say that Jesus intends to bring about division rather than only accepts inevitable conflict between people who will accept his teaching and those who will reject it. Yet Jesus certainly intends only that people accept his teaching and be reconciled with God – and so with one another. Therefore, the previous verse need not be taken to mean that Jesus intends his death.

means and by entrusting himself without reserve to the God who is faithful...

"Jesus, therefore, did not go looking for death for its own sake, however salutary that might be. And one can only be quite wrong to so interpret the words he spoke concerning his desire to drink the cup of his passion. Jesus simply wanted to be faithful to the end. He understood himself to be within that line of prophets, whose typical experience was one of persecution; for authentic service to God ends up in rousing up men and women's wrath against those who believe the gospel....

"In attentively considering the interpretations Paul gave to Christ's death, one perceives that the sacrificial and even redemptive understandings of this death hold up only when they are definitively located in relation to Jesus' love and God's love. Put in another way, when the Son surrenders himself and when the Father surrenders his Son, it is in no way *for the sake of* some chastisement *nor for the sake of* some satisfaction; it is *for his remaining faithful to the mission of love*".⁷⁵

Thus, nothing requires a faithful Christian to believe either that Jesus intended his death or that his dying's salvific benefits in any way flowed from his death itself – that is, from his *being dead* from Friday until Sunday.

Moreover, it seems to me that by meditating on the gospels as a whole devout Christians can find valid grounds for denying that Jesus intended his death. For example, praying in the garden *after* the Last Supper, Jesus begs the Father to be spared death, if possible. Jesus already has offered his sacrifice and, in doing so, has accepted the death he has foreseen. But the Father can do all things. Can the Father not spare Jesus while accepting his sacrifice, as once he spared Isaac while accepting Abraham's sacrifice?

Yes, the Father could do this. Yet he permits Jesus' betrayal, passion, and death. Why? While divine judgments and ways are beyond our comprehension, we can see, in the light of faith, that the Father allowed Jesus' suffering and death at least partly because they helped to accomplish three things: manifest the depth of the Trinity's love for us, motivate us to respond appropriately to that love, and show us how to do so despite the temptations of our fallen condition.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ LÉON-DUFOUR X., *Life and Death in the New Testament: The Teachings of Jesus and Paul*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986: 276-278.

⁷⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-117.

Jesus' very death (his being dead itself) was a pure privation with no meaning or potential for good. But Jesus' dying – that is, his perfect love in laying down his life – did in principle destroy death for everyone, because that dying overcame sin, which is the source of death and all human misery. And Jesus' resurrection somehow makes possible and brings about the resurrection of those who die united with him in divine love, faithful cooperation, and eucharistic bodily intimacy.⁷⁷

Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory.

⁷⁷ What about those who cannot cooperate with Jesus and receive holy Communion? Jesus' mediation is the only way for fallen humans to be saved (see *1 Tm* 2: 4-5), and he not only makes his saving action available in the sacraments but teaches that they are necessary for salvation (see *Jn* 2: 5, 6: 53-58). Those who, having heard that teaching, fail to heed it reject all that God offers in Jesus. But those who, through no fault of their own, are unable to respond to that teaching nevertheless can be made participants in Jesus' saving work and its fruits by the Holy Spirit's action; see GRISEZ, *Christian Moral Principles*, pp. 743-745.