SILENT HOMILIES

The Words Left Standing

What the saints said when the room grew quiet



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures

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Before You Begin

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This is not a long book, and it is not meant to be. The best Catholic treasures are often small enough to carry and large enough to change the way we notice a thing we already knew.

What follows is not a collection of mottoes for a wall. It is a walk through rooms where holy men and women came to the end of speech, and through the care we ought to take with what they left behind. Some last words are as sure as a Gospel page. Some come to us through a loving memory that may have polished a sentence. The Church does not canonise a final remark. She canonises a life. Still, a life often gathers itself, at the last, into a few words that sound like the person we already knew.

Read it if you sit with the dying. Read it if you are afraid of your own last hour. Read it if you have only ever met these saints as statues. The pages try to give each sentence its room, its year, and its company, so that a reader is not left holding a slogan with no house around it.

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Chapter 1

Why We Keep the Last Sentence

†

Human beings have always wanted to know what a person said at the end. Families lean in, and a nurse will sometimes write a line in a chart, because nobody wants the last thing said in the room to disappear. In the lives of the saints the hunger is older still. A community that has watched someone pray for fifty years wants to know whether the prayer held when the voice did not. That wish is not ghoulish. It is the same wish that makes us keep a letter: we want the person to go on speaking after the room has changed.

The danger is obvious, and it is better named at the start. Witnesses are tired, they love the dying, and they remember what they needed to hear. A century later a preacher shortens the story until it will fit on a holy card. Some famous last words are as well documented as a trial. Joan of Arc calling the name of Jesus from the fire at Rouen in 1431 was heard by people who later testified under oath. Other lines, even beloved ones, come to us through a tradition that may have tidied the grammar. A careful Catholic can love a tradition without pretending it is a recording.

The Church herself is slower than the holy cards. When a cause of canonisation is opened, the last hours are examined, but they are examined as part of a whole life. A beautiful sentence does not make a saint, and a silent death does not unmake one. Plenty of holy people died in fever, or under anaesthetic, or with no one in the room who later wrote anything down. God is not waiting for a clever last line.

And yet the old attention is not wasted. Last words, when they can be trusted, are often the short form of a long obedience. Thomas More's sentence on the scaffold sounds like the man who had already refused a

false oath in the Tower. Thérèse saying that she loved God sounds like the girl who had already written that she would spend her heaven doing good on earth. We keep the sentence because it is the life, compressed. This little book tries to keep the life around the sentence, so that the compression does not become a fake.

Reflection

We want a last sentence because grief wants something it can hold. That is human. A letter, a voice, a line written in a notebook: these are ways of not losing the person all at once. The wish is not the problem. The problem begins when we treat a beautiful quotation as if it were the proof of holiness.

Catholic faith does not depend on holy-card perfection. A saint may die unconscious, or confused, or without saying anything memorable at all, and holiness is still in the life rather than in the production of a final quotation. The Church has never taught otherwise. She examines a life. She does not wait at the bedside for a motto.

The Gospel itself is quieter than we sometimes remember. Jesus spoke from the Cross, and He also remained silent before His judges. Both belong to Him. Speech is not the only holy thing a dying person can offer. Silence can be weakness, and it can also be trust. We do not get to decide which, from the corridor.

So why do we keep the last sentence, when we have one we can trust? Because it often sounds like the person we already knew. It does not invent a new saint at the last minute. It shows the grain of the old one. And when there is no sentence, the Church still gives us more than a quotation. She gives us the Communion of Saints: a company, not a caption.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, who spoke from the Cross and who also kept silence, teach us to hear the saints without turning them into slogans. Amen.

Chapter 2

He Spoke First

†

If the saints have last words worth keeping, it is because they went to school on a Friday afternoon outside Jerusalem. The Gospels do not give us a private diary of those hours. They give us what the Church has always called the Seven Last Words: not seven chatterings, but seven sentences spoken across thirst, mockery, and a darkening sky. Father, forgive them. Today you will be with me in Paradise. Woman, behold your son. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. I thirst. It is finished. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

Two of those sentences matter especially for everything that follows. "It is finished," in St John's Gospel, is not a sigh of relief. It is a workman's word. The work He came to do has been brought to its end. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," in St Luke, is a night prayer lifted from the psalms and spoken at the edge of death. A devout Jew learned Psalm 31 as a boy. The Son of David dies with a verse He did not invent.

The first Christian death after His is already an echo. St Luke tells us that Stephen, being stoned outside Jerusalem, saw the heavens opened and cried, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt and said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." The Acts of the Apostles wants you to hear the Cross in the courtyard. The Church did not later decorate Stephen with Christ's words. Stephen had already learned them. That is the pattern. Saints do not usually invent a last theology on the mattress. They spend a lifetime putting words into the heart so that, when the mind is tired, the heart still has a sentence left.

If you want a key to this whole book, it is there. We do not study last words in order to collect rarities. We study them because they show what

a person had already decided to love. The hour of death does not often convert a life into its opposite. It reveals the grain. Christ's last words reveal the grain of the Gospel. The saints, at their best, reveal that they had been listening.

Reflection

Christian last words begin with Christ. That is a stranger fact than it first sounds. We sometimes talk as if the saints invented a beautiful way of dying, and the Church later noticed. Stephen did not invent Christianity while the stones were falling. He used sentences he had already heard. "Receive my spirit" is the shape of Christ's own prayer. "Do not hold this sin against them" is the shape of "Father, forgive them." The echo is the point.

This is why the Church puts words into our mouths long before we need them: the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the psalms, the responses at Mass, Compline night after night, and the acts of faith, hope and charity. Repetition is not necessarily empty. Sometimes it is how the heart learns what to say when the mind is tired, so that a sentence practised on an ordinary Tuesday can still be there on a Thursday when speech is failing.

Stephen's death is in Scripture, which is why we can speak of it with a confidence we do not have for every later story. Luke wanted the Church to hear the connection. The first martyr dies facing the Lord he has just seen, and he dies asking mercy for the men who are killing him. That is not a technique. It is a life that had already been bent toward Christ.

If you are afraid that you will have nothing to say, begin with the words the Church already gives you. You do not have to compose a last theology. You have to let a true sentence become familiar. Christ spoke first. The saints, at their best, were only answering.

A Short Prayer

Father, into Your hands we commend the dying, and our own speech before we need the sentence. Amen.

Chapter 3

Eighty and Six Years Have I Served Him

†

Around the year 155, in the stadium at Smyrna, an old bishop was told to swear by the fortune of Caesar and curse Christ. His name was Polycarp. The church in that city remembered him as a hearer of the apostle John. Irenaeus, who knew him, later said the same. The account of his death, written soon afterwards by the church of Smyrna itself, is one of the earliest Christian martyr stories we possess. It is not a medieval romance. It reads like a letter from people who had just buried their father.

When the proconsul pressed him, Polycarp answered with a sentence the Church has never managed to forget. "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" He was not doing arithmetic for a crowd. He was saying that a whole lifetime had already been spent in one direction, and that it was too late, and too ungrateful, to turn. They burned him. The letter says he prayed aloud before the fire, blessing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

A generation earlier, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, had been marched toward Rome under guard. He did not leave us a scaffold speech. He left letters written on the road. To the church in Rome he begged them not to interfere. "I am the wheat of God," he wrote, "and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ." Those words were not spoken in the sand of an arena. They were written beforehand, which may be more impressive. A man who can say such a thing while he still has time to take it back has already chosen his last sentence.

Joan of Arc, more than a thousand years later, brings the same grain into a different fire. On 30 May 1431 she was burned in the market place at Rouen. Years afterwards, at the trial that cleared her name, witnesses said she called on the name of Jesus again and again as the flames rose, and that she asked for a cross to be held up where she could see it. We do not have to make the scene prettier than it was. It was an execution. What the witnesses could not quite get over was that the girl kept using a name.

Reflection

It is easy to admire a martyr and then leave the admiration in the stadium. Polycarp, Ignatius and Joan are not there to make ordinary courage look small. They are there to show that courage at the end normally has a history. Polycarp had served Christ for decades. Ignatius had already chosen the image of wheat and bread, which is a Eucharistic image, while he still had a road ahead of him. Joan kept calling a name she had not learned that morning.

So the useful question is a quiet one. What words are becoming instinctive in me? What name do I use when I am frightened? What prayer comes without being fetched? What we say often can become instinctive. That is one reason the Church encourages us to use the Holy Name now, in ordinary life, rather than waiting until we are frightened or dying.

We should not wait for a fire to begin learning the name. That is not a scolding. It is a mercy. The Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Holy Name said slowly: these are small enough for a kitchen and strong enough for a worse room. Ignatius wrote his sentence while he could still have crossed it out. Most of us still have that kind of time.

The Church keeps these three because the words were already true before the end made them famous. Eighty-six years. A letter on the road. A name in the fire. None of them was invented for the crowd.

A Short Prayer

King who saved Polycarp, keep us from cursing the One we have already served. Amen.

Chapter 4

The King's Good Servant

†

On the morning of 6 July 1535 a London lawyer walked out of the Tower toward a block on Tower Hill. Thomas More had been Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor. He had written books, raised children, and joked at his own table. He had also refused to take the oath that would have named the King head of the Church in England. The refusal looks, from a distance, like a political career ending badly. Up close it is a man deciding that some sentences cannot be said, even to save a head.

What he said on the scaffold has come down in more than one wording. The line Catholics know best is this: "I die the King's good servant, but God's first." His son-in-law William Roper, who loved him and wrote his life, and other early witnesses, give us the sense if not always the identical syllables. More was not announcing a rebellion. He was announcing an order. Service to the prince was real. It was not final. A man who had spent years choosing his words in court chose, at the end, a sentence that still said what he meant.

Two weeks earlier, on 22 June, John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, and the only bishop who had held with More, had died on the same hill. Fisher was old and ill. Early accounts say that as he climbed the scaffold he opened a New Testament and found himself in the seventeenth chapter of St John, the prayer of Christ for those the Father had given Him. He asked the people to pray for him. He died as a bishop who had refused to treat the King's new title as if it were a sacrament. In two weeks England had lost the lawyer who could still laugh, and the only bishop who had stood with him.

Last words from a scaffold are public on purpose. The state wanted a spectacle of shame. More and Fisher gave it a lesson in where loyalty stops. If you are tempted to quote More as a motto against every government you dislike, slow down. He had served the Crown faithfully for years. The point was not contempt for authority. The point was that authority stops. God does not.

Reflection

More's point is not that government is bad. Earthly authority is real. He had exercised it. He had served the King. The Catholic idea here is an order of loyalty, not a mood of refusal. A prince, a parliament, a court, a employer: these can ask true things. They cannot ask the last thing. God comes first. When a sentence would deny that, the sentence cannot be said.

That is a matter of conscience, and conscience is not a private feeling. More and Fisher were not inventing a religion to suit the morning. They were refusing a title they believed the King could not truthfully hold. A formed conscience is a conscience taught by the faith, not a conscience that has decided to be interesting. The courage, when it came, was the courage to refuse a sentence they already knew they could not say.

Fisher's New Testament, if the early accounts are right, opened on Christ's own prayer for His own. That is a gentler last reading than a slogan. He asked the crowd to pray for him. More asked them to pray for the King. Neither man used the scaffold to settle a score. They used it to keep an order they had already kept in private.

The chapter is not a lesson in contemporary politics. It is a lesson in not selling the sentence that cannot be sold. Most of us will never stand on Tower Hill. We will be asked smaller untruths. The practice is the same. Say the true thing while it is still cheap. The expensive hour is a poor time to begin.

A Short Prayer

Lord of lords, keep us good servants where we ought to serve, and keep us from selling the sentence that cannot be sold. Amen.

Chapter 5

Welcome, Sister Death

†

Francis of Assisi died at dusk on 3 October 1226, in a hut near the little church called the Porziuncola, on the plain below Assisi. He was in his mid-forties and worn thin. The brothers who loved him had carried him home. In those last days he asked them to sing the Canticle of Brother Sun, the praise of fire, water and weather he had made when he was already nearly blind, and he added a verse he had not written at the beginning. He welcomed Sister Death.

That welcome needs its setting or it will sound like a poster. Francis had spent years calling created things his brothers and sisters because they came from the same Father. Death, in that grammar, is not a stranger who breaks into the family. She is the last sister who takes you to the door. The early sources also say that the brothers sang Psalm 142 while he was dying, the psalm of a hunted man who cries that he has no one at his right hand except the Lord. Francis did not compose a new spirituality for the mattress. He used the songs he already had.

Clare, who had followed him out of Assisi society and lived a hidden life at San Damiano, died on 11 August 1253. The sisters around her remembered a sentence that is almost startling in its simplicity. “Blessed are You, O God, for having created me.” A woman who had fasted, governed, and fought for the privilege of owning nothing, ended by thanking God for the fact of her own existence. It is the opposite of a life that treats the self as an accident. Gratitude, at the end, can be as short as that.

Neither death was tidy in the way a painting is tidy. There was pain. There were brothers and sisters who did not want to let go. The words

we keep are not a denial of the pain. They are what the pain did not manage to cancel. If your own last hour is less eloquent than a thirteenth-century account, you are still in the same family. The point of Sister Death is not style. It is belonging.

Reflection

Christianity does not call death good in itself. St Paul calls death an enemy. Francis knew pain. The verse about Sister Death was added by a man who was already nearly blind and close to the end. He was not pretending that dying was pleasant. He was placing death inside a family he already believed in. Because Christ has passed through death and risen, a Christian does not go through that door alone. That is why a brother can call death Sister without telling a lie about the pain.

Clare's sentence is stranger, and it may be the deeper of the two. "Blessed are You, O God, for having created me." She does not thank God for a vision, or for a foundation, or for a reputation. She thanks Him for the fact that she exists. That is a Catholic theology of creation, said in one line. To be is already a gift. A life of poverty had not taught her that she was a mistake. It had taught her that she was given.

The two sentences belong together. Francis welcomes the last sister. Clare thanks God for having been made at all. Neither sentence cancels the grief of the people standing round the bed. The brothers did not want to let Francis go. The sisters did not want to lose Clare. Welcome and gratitude are not the same thing as indifference.

If your own ending is less composed than either of these, you have not left the family. The songs they used were songs they already had. Psalm 142. A canticle. A thank-you for having been created. The Church still has those words. You do not have to invent a prettier death than the one you are given.

A Short Prayer

Christ, praised with Brother Sun and Sister Death, make our ending a welcome and not a theft. Amen.

Chapter 6

A Daughter of the Church

†

Teresa of Ávila died in the convent at Alba de Tormes on the night of 4 October 1582. The calendar itself was being changed that night, which is why some books say the fifteenth. She was sixty-seven. She had spent years reforming Carmel, writing books the Church still reads, and travelling bad Spanish roads in a wagon. The sisters who watched her heard more than one sentence. The one the tradition has kept with most confidence is also the least theatrical. "At last I die a daughter of the Church."

It is easy to miss why she needed to say it. Teresa had been investigated. Her visions had been doubted. In sixteenth-century Spain a woman who claimed to speak with Christ could be praised as a mystic or suspected as a fraud, and sometimes both in the same year. To call herself a daughter of the Church at the end was not piety as decoration. It was a last placing of her whole strange life inside a communion she refused to leave, even when that communion had made her tired.

John of the Cross, her collaborator and her junior, died nine years later, on 14 December 1591, in the convent at Úbeda. He had been treated badly by some of his own brothers. He asked, toward the end, that they read him the Song of Songs. When the time came he repeated the line Christ had used: "Into Your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." A man who had written of the dark night did not invent a darker sentence for the occasion. He borrowed the psalm again. The mystics, at the point of death, often become very ordinary. That is part of their authority.

If you only know Teresa as the saint of the interior castle, her last claim can sound small. It is not small. A castle with no Church around it

becomes a private religion. She would not have that. John would not have a dark night that refused to end in someone's hands. Their last words are maps. They tell you where all the earlier pages were trying to go.

Reflection

Teresa dies calling herself a daughter of the Church. That sentence is easy to pass over, because it sounds modest. It is doing a great deal of work. A Catholic spiritual life is not a private project between "me and God." Mystical experiences do not put somebody above the Church. Visions do not replace communion. Teresa had been examined, doubted, and sometimes worn out by the very family she would not leave. At the end she placed herself inside it.

John makes the same point from the other side. He had written some of the most exact mystical theology the Church possesses. At Úbeda he asks for the Song of Songs, and then he returns to a line every devout Jew and every Christian already knew. "Into Your hands." The deeper some saints went into God, the less they needed an impressive sentence at the end. Their final language became ordinary Catholic language. That is not a failure of the earlier books. It is where the earlier books were going.

There is a warning in both deaths, and it is a kind one. A person can love prayer and still be tempted to make a private religion out of the love. Teresa would not. John would not. The Church is not an obstacle the mystic eventually outgrows. She is the household in which the mystic dies.

If your own prayer has never been extraordinary, you are not behind them at the end. The sentence they used was a sentence the Church already had. Daughter of the Church. Into Your hands. You can learn both without a vision.

A Short Prayer

O Lord, let us die as sons and daughters of the Church, and not as owners of our own visions. Amen.

Chapter 7

My God, I Love You

†

In the infirmary of the Carmel at Lisieux, on the evening of 30 September 1897, a young nun of twenty-four came to the end of a long tuberculosis. Her name in religion was Thérèse of the Child Jesus. Her sisters were in the room. They had been in the room for months. The last conversations, written down afterwards by her sister Pauline, are not a polished book. They are the scraps of a dying girl who was sometimes funny, sometimes frightened, and often unable to say much at all.

Toward seven o'clock her face changed. She looked at the crucifix and said, in words the sisters kept with care, "Oh! I love Him! My God, I love You!" Then she died. The sentence is famous now. It was not composed for fame. Thérèse had spent her short life teaching a little way that was really a way of remaining small enough to be lifted. The last cry is that way without the commentary. She did not explain love. She spent it.

Eighteen years earlier, on 16 April 1879, another French girl who had seen Our Lady died in the convent of Saint-Gildard at Nevers. Bernadette Soubirous was thirty-five and worn by asthma and the bone disease that had followed her from the damp of the Lourdes cachot. Those nearest her heard the Hail Mary, slowly, and the ending a poor sinner would use: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for me, a poor sinner." She had said for years that the Lady had asked for penitence. The last prayer did not suddenly become a speech about apparitions. It became the prayer every Catholic child is given, said by a woman who still called herself poor.

It is worth putting the two rooms next to each other. Thérèse looks at the crucifix and says that she loves God. Bernadette turns toward Mary and asks to be prayed for as a poor sinner. Neither girl tries to summarise a

doctrine. Both of them stay inside a sentence they had used when they were well. That is the quiet lesson. If you want a last word that will hold, do not save a special vocabulary for the last day. Use the true words now, while you still have breath to practise them.

Reflection

There is room for both in Catholic prayer. Sometimes we can tell God that we love Him. At other times all we can do is admit that we need Him. Thérèse and Bernadette show that neither prayer is less Christian than the other. "My God, I love You" is not a proud sentence, and "pray for me, a poor sinner" is not despair. They were not offering rival spiritualities. They were using the words they already had.

Neither woman invented a special deathbed vocabulary. That is the part worth keeping. Thérèse had been saying that she loved God on ordinary evenings. Bernadette had been saying the Hail Mary since childhood, and the Lady at Lourdes had not asked her for a new language. The last hour used the old language. Illness had not left them the energy to compose.

Catholics have been practising that hour every time they sincerely say the Hail Mary. "Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." The phrase is so familiar that we stop hearing it. It is not a decoration at the end of the prayer. It is the Church asking Our Lady, in advance, for the hour we have not reached. Bernadette simply said the sentence in the hour itself, and she said it in the first person.

If you cannot yet say "I love You" with Thérèse's clarity, you can still say Bernadette's sentence. There is room for both, because Catholic prayer has always known how to ask and how to love in the same breath. The two rooms are in the same household of the Church.

A Short Prayer

My God, I love You. Holy Mary, pray for me, a poor sinner. Amen.

Chapter 8

Rooms the Modern World Still Has

†

Not every holy death happens in a convent infirmary with sisters taking notes. In the basement of Block 11 at Auschwitz, in August 1941, Fr Maximilian Kolbe lay with nine other men who had been condemned to starve because one prisoner had escaped. Kolbe had stepped forward to take the place of a husband and father, Franciszek Gajowniczek. The guards did not keep a transcript. What fellow prisoners and later witnesses could say is simpler than a legend and harder than a poster. In that cell he led the Rosary and the hymns to Our Lady for as long as voices lasted. When the bunker was cleared, he was still alive and was killed by an injection on 14 August. We do not possess his last syllable as we possess Thérèse's. We possess days of spoken prayer in a place designed to make prayer look ridiculous.

Josephine Bakhita died in Schio, in northern Italy, on 8 February 1947. She had been stolen as a child in Darfur, sold more than once, and finally set free in Italy through the Canossian sisters who became her family. In the last days the sisters heard her return, in delirium, to the old captivity, and then to the name she trusted. "Madonna, Madonna." A woman whose earthly name had been taken from her more than once ended by calling on the Mother who had not been sold.

Gianna Beretta Molla, a doctor and a mother in Magenta, died on 28 April 1962, a week after the birth of her fourth child. In the second month of that pregnancy a fibroma was found on her uterus. She was offered ways of treating it that would have ended the pregnancy, including a hysterectomy, and a way of removing the fibroma while trying to save the child. She asked the surgeon to save the child, and she told her husband that if a choice had to be made, the child should be

saved. Gianna Emanuela was born by caesarean on 21 April. Gianna died a week later of septic peritonitis. Those near her remembered the plain repetition, "Jesus, I love you." This was her choice. It was not a rule that every Catholic mother must refuse treatment. The Church forbids direct abortion. She does not forbid every treatment of a mother's illness when the child's death is not the thing being chosen.

Padre Pio died in his cell at San Giovanni Rotondo in the early hours of 23 September 1968, having celebrated what would be his last Mass the previous evening. The brothers heard the old pair of names, whispered over and over: Jesus. Mary. John Paul II's last public appearance, on 30 March 2005, was a silent blessing from the window above St Peter's Square. He could not make the words come. In the days before, those closest to him heard a sentence that sounded like the man they knew: he wanted to go to the house of the Father. The window is worth remembering as much as the sentence. Sometimes the last word is a hand raised when the voice has already gone.

Reflection

Sometimes the last word is not a sentence at all. Kolbe did not leave us a famous line from the bunker. He left days of prayer in a cell where a speech would have been useless. Bakhita called on Our Lady by name. Padre Pio kept saying Jesus and Mary until the names were almost only breath. John Paul II lifted a hand at the window when the blessing would not come. None of these is less of a last word because it would not fit on a card. The Church has never required eloquence.

That should comfort anyone who has sat beside a person who could no longer speak. The last word may have been a Rosary said while the voice still held, or a name, or a blessing, or a silence offered to God, or simply endured. We do not have to supply a quotation the dying person did not have the breath to make.

Gianna's case needs the same honesty. She asked that her child be saved, and she died a week after the birth, saying that she loved Jesus. Catholics are right to honour that. We are not right to turn it into a law that a pregnant woman must refuse all care. Direct abortion is forbidden. Treatment of a real illness, where the child's death is not what is being chosen, is a different moral question. Gianna made a heroic choice. The Church does not impose that heroism as the only permitted path.

The rooms in this chapter are modern rooms: a bunker, a hospital, a cell, a window above a square. The words, where we have them, are old words. Jesus. Mary. A Rosary. A hand. The Church can work with that. She has never required a speech.

A Short Prayer

Jesus, Mary. Take the ones who have no sentence left, and be Yourself the word they cannot say. Amen.

Chapter 9

What These Words Are Not

†

A book of last words can do damage if it is read in the wrong spirit. It can make a timid person believe that holiness is a talent for dying on a phrase. It can make a grieving son feel that his mother's silence was a failure. It can turn Kolbe into a caption and More into a party slogan. The saints would have disliked all three uses.

Some deaths are sudden. Blessed Charles de Foucauld was killed at Tamanrasset on 1 December 1916 before he could preach a last homily. The prayer of abandonment he had written years earlier has had to stand in for the hour he was not given. That is allowed. A whole life of surrendered speech is a last word, even if the last minute is only noise and dust. God is not a journalist hunting a quote.

Some last hours are confused, because fever talks and morphine talks. A saint may ask for a cup, or fail to recognise a face, or cry in a way that would not look well on a holy card. The older lives sometimes tidied this. We do not have to. The sacrament of Anointing, the prayers for the dying, the crucifix held where the eyes can find it: these are the Church's ordinary mercy for an hour that may not be eloquent. If you sit with someone who cannot answer, you are not watching a failed saint. You are watching a child of God being carried, which is how most of us will go.

And some famous lines were never last words at all. "Pray, hope, and don't worry" is Padre Pio's advice to the living, not his dying breath. Aquinas's remark that his writings seemed like straw was spoken after a vision at Naples in December 1273, months before he died at Fossanova, not as a deathbed dismissal of theology. A careful reader lets a sentence stay in the room where it was said.

Reflection

If you sat beside someone who could not answer, this page is for you: a husband, a wife, a son or a daughter. The person in the bed was unconscious, or sedated, or confused, or living with dementia, or unable to speak, or breathing with difficulty. You waited for a sentence, and it did not come. That absence is not a verdict.

Your loved one did not fail because there were no beautiful last words. The Church has never taught that a holy death requires a speech. She has taught something quieter, and more useful. When the dying person cannot pray aloud, the Church prays around them. Anointing of the Sick. Viaticum, when it can still be received. The Apostolic Pardon, where a priest can give it. The Commendation of the Dying. A crucifix. A Rosary in someone else's fingers. The prayers of the family. The presence of the Church is not a substitute for the person's voice. It is what the Church does when the voice has gone.

You were not watching a failed saint. You were doing a work the saints themselves would have recognised: staying. The older lives sometimes tidied the confusion out of a death. You do not have to. Fever, sedation, a face that no longer knows you: none of these unbaptises a person. The sacrament does not require a speech in reply.

And if the sentence you have been quoting was never a last word at all, let it go back to the room where it was said. Pio's advice belongs to the living. Aquinas's straw belongs to Naples, months before Fossanova. Honesty about words is a form of love. It keeps the person you loved from being measured against a caption.

A Short Prayer

Lord, save us from collecting the saints as if they were mottoes, and from despairing if our own last hour is only silence. Amen.

Chapter 10

Learning the Sentence Before We Need It

†

If last words are usually the short form of a long obedience, then the work is earlier than we think. Stephen could forgive because he had already watched Christ forgive. More could order his loyalties on Tower Hill because he had already ordered them in private. Thérèse could say that she loved God because she had been saying it, without an audience, on ordinary evenings in a Norman convent.

The Church has always known this, which is why she puts words into our mouths long before we are dying: the Hail Mary, the Jesus Prayer, the acts of faith, hope and charity, the response at Mass, "Lord, I am not worthy," and "Into Your hands" at Compline, night after night, when nobody is dying except in the ordinary way of going to sleep. These are not decorations. They are rehearsal. A person who has never practised a true sentence should not be surprised if none arrives when the mind is tired.

There is also the sentence we speak to the dying, which is part of the same mercy. The Commendation of the Dying is a set of old words the Church places around a bed so that the family does not have to invent a liturgy out of panic. Go forth, Christian soul. Saints of God, come to his aid. If you have never read those prayers, read them before you need them. They will give you something kinder than small talk, and something sturdier than a private speech.

If these pages have done their work, you will not only remember a few famous lines. You will notice what you are already repeating. You will put a crucifix where a dying person can see it. You will not force a quotation out of someone whose work is now to breathe.

Reflection

Catholics already practise for death without usually thinking about it. Every sincere Hail Mary includes the words "now and at the hour of our death," so the Church has been asking Our Lady for that hour long before it arrives. Compline gives us "Into Your hands." Mass gives us words of humility and trust. The Jesus Prayer puts the Holy Name in the mouth, and the Rosary teaches the lips what to do when concentration becomes difficult. None of this is a trick for producing an impressive ending. It is the Church refusing to leave us without words.

Familiar prayer can become a mercy when illness leaves us too tired to invent anything. That is not the same as saying the prayers are mechanical. A sentence can be old and still be true. The danger is the opposite one: saving a special vocabulary for a day that may not leave us the strength to use it. Bernadette did not switch languages at Nevers. John did not invent a new line at Úbeda. They used what was already in the mouth.

The goal is not to manufacture last words. The goal is to live now in such a way that the words already in the heart are true. If you love God on an ordinary evening, "My God, I love You" will not be a performance at the end. If you have been asking Our Lady to pray for you at the hour of death, that hour will not be the first time she has heard the request.

And if the hour comes with no sentence at all, the rehearsal has not been wasted. The Church will still have the words, and someone can say them around the bed. St Joseph, whom the Church calls on for a happy death, does not require a speech before he comes.

A Short Prayer

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul. Assist me in my last agony. Amen.

A Last Word

†

The saints did not save their best sentence for a performance. They used the true words while they still had ordinary days, and at the end those words were still there.

Keep the book if it helps. Give it to someone who sits with the dying, or to someone who is afraid of the hour and should not have to face it on slogans alone.

May our last speech, if we are given any, be only the short form of a life that already belonged to Him.

St Joseph, patron of a happy death, pray for us. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

Sources and Further Reading

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Scripture is used in the Church's own voice, and paraphrases are not marked as quotations. The scenes are the Seven Last Words, especially John 19:30 and Luke 23:46, praying Psalm 31; the stoning of Stephen, Acts 7:59–60; Psalm 142, sung at Francis's death in the early Franciscan sources. Death as the last enemy is St Paul's, 1 Corinthians 15:26.

Polycarp: the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the letter written by the church of Smyrna soon after his death, which gives the "eighty and six years" answer and the prayer before the fire. His link with the apostle John is that church's memory, later repeated by Irenaeus, not a modern biography. Ignatius of Antioch: the Letter to the Romans, written on the road, in which he calls himself the wheat of God. It is a letter, not a speech from the arena.

Joan of Arc: the rehabilitation, or nullification, process of the 1450s, in which witnesses described her calling on Jesus and asking for a cross at Rouen on 30 May 1431. Thomas More: William Roper's Life, and other early accounts, give the sense of the scaffold words of 6 July 1535. The familiar wording is traditional, and the syllables are not identical in every account. John Fisher: early lives of the bishop for 22 June 1535, including the report that a New Testament opened on John 17. These are early witness, not a transcript.

Francis of Assisi: the early Franciscan lives, especially Thomas of Celano, on the Canticle, the verse for Sister Death, and the singing of Psalm 142 at the Porziuncola on 3 October 1226. Clare: the sisters' memory, kept in the process of canonisation and the early legend, of her thanks to God for having created her, 11 August 1253. Teresa of Ávila: the sisters at Alba de Tormes, including Anne of St Bartholomew, on the night the calendar

changed, 4/15 October 1582, and the line that she died a daughter of the Church. John of the Cross: early Carmelite accounts of his death at Úbeda on 14 December 1591, the reading of the Song of Songs, and "Into Your hands."

Thérèse of Lisieux: the Last Conversations, written down by her sister Pauline, Mother Agnès of Jesus, for 30 September 1897. Bernadette: the sisters of Saint-Gildard at Nevers, for 16 April 1879. Maximilian Kolbe: fellow prisoners, including the reports later gathered around Bruno Borgowiec, on the bunker at Auschwitz in August 1941. This is witness to days of prayer, not a transcript of a last syllable. Josephine Bakhita: the Canossian sisters at Schio, for 8 February 1947. Gianna Beretta Molla: the family account, including Pietro Molla, of the uterine fibroma found in 1961, the birth of Gianna Emanuela on 21 April 1962, and her death on 28 April. Her choice is not a general rule of Catholic medical ethics. Padre Pio: the Capuchin brothers at San Giovanni Rotondo, for 23 September 1968. John Paul II: the public appearance at the window on 30 March 2005, and the memory of those closest to him. Charles de Foucauld was killed at Tamanrasset on 1 December 1916. The prayer of abandonment was written earlier. Thomas Aquinas's remark that his writing seemed like straw belongs to the vision at Naples on 6 December 1273, reported later in the canonisation inquiry, not to his death at Fossanova on 7 March 1274.

Catholic prayer around the dying: the Rite of Anointing and the Pastoral Care of the Sick, including Viaticum, the Apostolic Pardon, and the Commendation of the Dying. The Hail Mary, Compline, and the Jesus Prayer are used as the Church's ordinary rehearsal, not as magic.

Keeping the Words

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A booklet about last words needs a kind of care that a holy card does not. A famous sentence can appear on a thousand websites and still not be the last thing a person said. Aquinas's straw was not said at Fossanova. Pio's advice was not his dying breath. More's scaffold line has more than one wording. To leave a sentence standing, someone has to find the early account, compare it with the later telling, and be willing to say when we do not know.

These Little Treasures remain free to read. No one sitting beside a bed, where words are already becoming few, should have to pay before they are allowed the company of Stephen, or Bernadette, or the Church's own prayers for the dying.

Keeping the words takes work. It means reading a martyrdom, a rehabilitation, a sister's notebook, a husband's memory. It means checking a date when the calendar itself changed overnight. It means separating what a witness heard from what a later preacher needed. Then comes the writing, and the cutting. A short book can take a long time to become quiet enough to trust.

If this one has helped you, and if you are able to support the work through the Silent Homilies website, I would be truly grateful. A gift is not payment for these pages. They are already yours. It simply gives me the time and the books to keep checking the next sentence before I let it stand.

If you cannot give, nothing is owed. Pass this booklet to somebody beside a bed where words are becoming few. www.silenthomilies.com

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