Jesus as a Paradigm for Dying Well

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Slide 1: Ars Moriendi: The Art of Dying
   I. Medicalized Death
   II. Looking for an Alternative: Ars Moriendi
   III. Still looking: Towards a Contemporary Art of Dying

Thank you. It’s a great honor to be here today, and a privilege to be able to present something of my work at ETS. The slide outlines both my new book and my remarks today. I will say almost nothing about the medicalization of death in the middle of the twentieth century, a little more about the Ars Moriendi of the fifteenth century, and at least something about my effort to imagine a contemporary ars moriendi for the Christian community.

Slide 2: [image of cleaning lady]

“We are all like the cleaning lady. We come to dust.” It’s a line from Peter DeVries’ wonderful novel, Slouching Towards Kalamazoo – although he stole it from Shakespeare. But whether we take our reminders of mortality from DeVries or from Shakespeare, from the Bible or from the ashes of Ash Wednesday, the simple fact is we will all die.

Everyone dies, but not everyone dies in the same way. That too is obvious, I suppose. Some of us will die of congestive heart failure. Some of us will die from cancer. A few of us will die from amyloidosis. But this very way of describing the different ways we will all die is itself a sign that we have “medicalized” death.
Somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century, with the stunning development of new medical powers to intervene against death, death became a medical event.

Death itself, for a patient hooked up to machines, might require expert medical diagnosis, that flat line on an EEG. But **dying** was no less “medicalized.”

The body of the dying person became the battlefield where heroic doctors and nurses waged their war against death. The lab reports and body scans provided surveillance and dictated strategy, but the doctors remained in charge, even in the face of almost certain defeat.

**Death was the enemy to be defeated by the greater powers of medicine.**

Death became medicine’s “agony of defeat.”

Death and dying had been taken over by medicine.

Medicine had great successes, but the failures of those successes also became clear in the late twentieth century.

One obvious failure, of course, was that, in spite of the successes of medicine, **people still died,** and they died sometimes **lingering deaths,** hooked up to machines, under the control of the medical expert, surrounded by technology rather than by those who loved them, and still hoping for some miracle of modern science to deliver them.

For about fifty years now people have been complaining about medicalized death. The patient rights movement complained about depersonalization and sought to remedy it by an emphasis on patient autonomy. The death awareness movement complained about denial and sought a remedy in the mantra that “death is natural.”

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**Slide 4: The movements of complaint.**
These movements are important but deeply flawed. I treat them in the first part of the book, along with the more promising Hospice movement, but I leave them aside for now.

It is easy to blame physicians when people do not die well, but it is not their responsibility to teach people how to die. The problem is not their skill but our imagination.

Communities of faith, I think, have the resources and the responsibility to re-form the imagination, to teach their members how to die well. The church, however, has been too often silent about death, and too often silent about the medicalization of death, in effect surrendering death—or at least dying—to medicine.

Slide: The Silence and surrender of the church

The Christian community once did take responsibility for teaching people how to die. The Ars Moriendi of the fifteenth century, to which we now turn, is one stunning example. There are problems in it, as we will see, but it may nevertheless provide some clues to the meaning of a faithful dying today.

Slide 5: II. Looking for an Alternative: Ars Moriendi: Dying for Dummies

Death haunted the imagination of the fifteenth century. And little wonder. They had seen too much of it. The ruthless plague, pandemic warfare, and recurrent famines were messengers of death, death, and more death. Even so, in the midst of that sad century the Ars Moriendi attempted to show Christians a way to die well and faithfully.

 Ars Moriendi names both a particular work and a genre of late medieval literature. The genre, and this particular work, was decidedly non-elitist. Today you would find it in the self-help section of the bookstore,
and probably bearing a title like, “Dying for Dummies.”

These little handbooks
with their instructions for dying well
formed the imagination of the church for centuries.

One early variation was both much abridged
and accompanied by striking wood block prints.

It was this shorter and illustrated version,
a 15th century equivalent of a Reader’s Digest edition,
that was entitled Ars Moriendi.

It was itself extraordinarily popular,
and it is that little work that we consider today. ¹

Slide 6: Beginning with a Commendation of Death

Death is nothing other than the release from prison and the ending of exile, and
discharging off an heavy burden that is the body, finshyng of all
infirmities, escaping off all perils, destroying off all evil things,
breaking of all bondage, paying off all obligations of natural duty,
returning again into one’s country,
and entering into bliss and joy.

Crafte and Knowledge For to Dye Well (1490)

Works in the Ars Moriendi genre typically began
with a “commendation of death.”

So does our little handbook, even if it is quite abridged.

The commendation itself comes to this:

Death is nothing other than the release from prison and the ending of exile,
the removal of the heavy burden that is the body,
the end of all infirmities, the escape from all perils,
the destruction of all evil things, the breaking of all bondage,
the release from all obligations of natural duty,
the return to one’s own country,
and the entrance into bliss and joy.

Quite a commendation indeed!

A dying person should not be sorry at the prospect of death
or troubled by it.

On the contrary, if he would die well,
he may and should die “gladly.”
He should welcome death, receiving it as one would a “well-beloved and trusted friend.”

Slide 7: The Temptations of Moriens

The largest part of *Ars Moriendi* is given to the temptations that the dying person will encounter.

Slide 8: FIGURE 1: The Temptation to Lose Faith

In the first figure we meet *Moriens*, the dying Everyman. He lies on his bed, emaciated. At the bedside stand three doctors, evidently discussing the case, but this is **hardly a medicalized death.** We need not be privy to their conversation to know that the man is dying. The medical prognosis seems clear enough, but given the other characters in this deathbed scene it is clearly the spiritual prognosis that should concern us.

There at the head of the bed are the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and God the Father. If they keep company with *Moriens* and he with them, there is every reason for confidence. But there are also those **demons**, beastly, grotesque little creatures. And they are working hard on *Moriens*, tempting Moriens to **lose faith.** It is the first and fundamental temptation of dying in *Ars Moriendi*.

Slide 9: FIGURE 2: The virtue of faithfulness

Mercifully, in the second illustration a good angel visits *Moriens* and encourages him to **stand firm in the faith.**

The demons scatter across the bottom of the page, looking more ludicrous than ominous now. They slither away bearing scrolls announcing their defeat and frustration. The matter is not yet settled, however. The demons have not yet given up.
The demons return in the third figure, in greater numbers and even more hideous, to tempt *Moriens* to **despair**, to lose hope. The demons in the illustration accuse *Moriens* of various sins: adultery, greed, murder, perjury, and a whole list of sins. *Moriens* is a sinner.

**What hope** can there be for his soul? Perhaps the demons will be victorious after all.

Lest the demons have cause to rejoice, another angel visits *Moriens* in the fourth engraving, encouraging him not to despair. **Hope** is possible, after all. And the evidence surrounds the bedside. There they are, sinners all, brought through the judgment by the grace of God:

- Mary Magdalene, with her reputation as a sinner,
- the thief on the cross,
- Paul struck down from his horse on the way to persecute and kill,
- and Peter, with the cock whose three crows marked Peter’s perjury.

And there in the background are the heavens opening, with a path for sinners. There is evidence enough of the great grace of God upon repentant sinners, evidence enough to put a stop to despair, evidence enough to send the demons once more slithering away. The one hurries off, bearing a scroll announcing his defeat. Another takes cover under the bed.

But the issue is not yet settled. That demon hiding under the bed is simply waiting for a new opportunity.

And that opportunity comes with the next engraving. It is the temptation to **impatience**. Only one demon is shown,
but you may be sure that the one under the bed is still there making it quite uncomfortable. The single demon seems to be doing a good job.

The facing page of text identifies the temptation to impatience as a temptation “against charity,” for love demands that we love God above all things. The one who does not love God sufficiently, who does not love God above all, will be most easily tempted to be impatient, to murmur and complain. To receive sickness and death with sorrow, it says, is a sign of not loving God sufficiently.²

Slide 13: FIGURE 6: The Virtue of Patience

In the sixth engraving an angel comes to the bedside of Moriens once again and to his aid once again, inspiring patience. In addition to God the Father and Christ, crowned now not with glory but with his crown of thorns, saints and martyrs accompany Moriens. Their presence encourages Moriens to be a martyr, too, to bear witness (martus) by his patient endurance of suffering to his confidence in God and to his love for God above all else.

These all minister to Moriens, who is shown no longer agitated but peacefully at prayer.

Slide 14: FIGURE 7: The Temptation to Pride

Having endured the temptations to lose faith, hope, and charity, Moriens is not quite done – nor are the demons quite done with Moriens. There is another – and terrible – temptation waiting. It is the temptation to “vainglory,” to pride. The demons look confident, and well they might. It is a clever strategy, the devil’s “catch 22.” If you manage to resist the devil in his efforts to bring you low, he will get you for being exalted. The demons failed when they tempted Moriens
to give up the faith, to despair, and to impatience, so now they praise him as commendably firm in the faith, as righteous, and as patient, and they offer him crowns.

One demon delivers not only a crown – but the temptation. “Exalt yourself,” he says.

The crowns are enticing. The flattery feels good. Moriens is in trouble.

**Slide 15: FIGURE 8: The Virtue of Humility**

He is in trouble, that is, until angels visit again in the eighth engraving, encouraging him to humble himself, warning him against pride, and praying for him.

**Slide 16: FIGURE 9: The Temptation to Avarice**

But the final temptation awaits; it is avarice. One demon points toward a fine house, a fine horse with its fine groom, and a fine little wine cellar inside the fine house (where a thief can be seen helping himself to a little wine). Another points toward a man and a woman who have evidently come to visit. And the third demon, almost solicitously, gestures toward a woman and two children, one still an infant. They are evidently the family of Moriens.

How can Moriens let all this go? (Intende thesauro; “consider your treasures.”) How can he let such good friends go? (Providae amicis.) How can he abandon his family? What will become of them?

Such anxious thoughts may set Moriens’ mind on “things of earth,” carnal things, and drive out thoughts of God. So the demons hope at any rate.
Avarice, the facing page warns, tempts the “secular and carnal,”
who are “preoccupied with temporal and outward things.”
The devil tempts those who are dying
with their love of the things of this earth,
    things like a wife and children, friends, and possessions.
Moriens should put these things out of his mind and attend to God,
    considering the greater riches of heaven.
But these “carnal attachments” are real and hard to surrender.
Slide 17: FIGURE 10: The Virtue of Letting Go

Once again, however, an angel attends him,
supporting and consoling him.
He exhorts Moriens to let go,
not to hold on too tightly to earthly goods, not to be avaricious.
There is Mary again,
who let go her own son.
And there he is, hanging on the cross.
He did not count even equality with God as a thing to be grasped (Phil. 2).
    He let go his heavenly glory and surrendered his life for his sheep.

So Moriens renounces the things he has loved in this world
    and dies willingly and happily.
The demons have been defeated once again.

Slide 18: FIGURE 11: The Death of Moriens

The demons defeated, the temptations resisted,
the final engraving depicts the death of Moriens.

Ars Moriendi closes with a single page
    summarizing the rest of what belonged to the genre.
The genre would typically include
    a little catechism for the dying,
    an instruction to meditate on the death of Christ,
    a set of prayers to be said by Moriens,
    and an instruction to those who attend him in his dying hours.

There is wisdom here.
There is no silence or denial.
Moriens has decisions to make,
    and the doctors cannot make them for him.
It attends to the virtues as constitutive of a faithful dying.
It attends to prayer as a practice for dying well
and for caring well for the dying.
And it invites us to remember Jesus,
to attend to the story of Jesus’ death
as paradigmatic for a Christian’s dying.

Slide 19: III. Still Looking: Towards a Contemporary Art of Dying

I take that invitation to remember Jesus
to be the fundamental clue to a faithful dying.

But to take that clue seriously,
to remember Jesus well and faithfully,
will demand that we **challenge and reject**
not only the medicalization of death
but also certain features of the *Ars Moriendi*.

The Church **does need to retrieve** it – or something like it –
as an **alternative** to medicalized death.
We need to retrieve it – but we **also need to modify it**, for when tested by the story of Jesus,
it turns out that *Ars Moriendi* is deeply **flawed**.
We have time only for some brief attention to these flaws,
time only for some hints and suggestions
for a contemporary “art of dying.”

*Ars Moriendi* began with a **commendation of death** –
and so did the problems with it!
**In memory of Jesus we should not commend death.**
We should commend rather the victory of God over death.

Accordingly, my effort to imagine a contemporary *ars moriendi*
begins with a commendation of embodied and communal life.

Jesus died on a Roman cross,
**but God raised him up,**
"the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:20).³
When the powers of death and doom had done their damnedest,
God had the last word.
God raised this Jesus up.

Against *Ars Moriendi*, the grounds for hope in the Christian story are not to be found in some "soul" that has its immortality independently of God and finds liberation in the death of the body.

Against the Baconian project and a medicalized death, the grounds for hope are not to be found in the technological mastery over nature. (And against the mantra of the death awareness movement, the grounds for hope are not located in some romantic account of nature, as bringing always the return of life and spring.)

These are the grounds for hope: the powerful and creative word of God that can call a cosmos out of chaos, give light to the darkness and life to the dust.

These are the grounds of hope: the faithfulness of the triune God to what was the cause of God from the very beginning.

This is the reason for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15): Jesus was raised in this world and in this history, and this world and this history and this flesh have – happily – no escape.

This is no commendation of death. This is a celebration of a life-giving God.

The commendation of death in *Ars Moriendi* owes more to the Stoic consolation literature and more to the Platonists than it does to Scripture.

The celebration of death in *Ars Moriendi* comes too close to a denial of death, too close to a denial of the sadness and pain of a Friday we call good and of that long wait of Holy Saturday.

At least three additional flaws in *Ars Moriendi* may be traced to this flaw in the beginning.
One flaw that follows from this Platonic celebration of death is the disparagement of what Ars Moriendi calls “carnal relationships” and “worldly attachments.”

Granted that my parents and wife and children are not gods, they are nevertheless the good gifts of God. To treat these relationship as trivial, to disparage them as “carnal,” is not a mark of great spiritual maturity but of ingratitude.

Dying well requires attention to them, not the neglect of them.

Words of gratitude and praise,
requests for forgiveness and the granting of forgiveness,
provision for their future well-being,
and words of love and affection –
all of that and more belong to dying well. 4

A second flaw is the shrinking of Christian hope.
By transposing the judgment of God from the end of history to the bedroom of Moriens, Ars Moriendi distorts the judgment of God and shrinks the Christian hope.

There is a narrowing of vision
from the cosmic horizon of a world restored to the fate of an individual soul.

This narrowing of vision,
this focus on the passage of an individual soul to bliss, runs the risk of reducing hope to something egocentric.

We will die well, however, when we focus less on ourselves than on God’s cause.

We will die well when we consider others besides ourselves.

And a third flaw to be traced to this commendation of death is that Ars Moriendi has no place for lament.

It invites us to remember Jesus. But then how can we forget that in Gethsemane, on his way to his death, he did not celebrate death but lamented it? How can we forget that on that horrible cross
he made the human cry of lament his own cry,
"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"
(Psalm 22:1, Mark 16:34).

The death of Jesus was not a pretty death.
He died young and violently.
It was an act of judicial murder.
He died alone and in pain,
abandoned by his disciples and tortured by the soldiers.
It is not the sort of death we should wish for anyone,
not the sort of death we would want for ourselves.

But his death was, nevertheless, paradigmatic.

In the book I consider the words of Jesus from the cross,
but I leave that aside to revisit the virtues.

Without celebrating death,
we may nevertheless learn from Jesus the virtues
so important to Ars Moriendi.

Faithfulness is loyalty to God and to the cause of God.
It is not displayed in an asceticism
that is born of dualism
and takes flight from this world to some “other world.”
It is displayed in gratitude to God for the gifts of God,
which may include a little time for the tasks
of reconciliation and forgiveness, justice and generosity.

Hope is the confidence that God will be faithful to the cause of God.
It is not inconsistent with lament.
Indeed, it is displayed in lament.
Jesus knew how Psalm 22 ended.
He knew the Psalmist trusted God to hear the one who cries to him.
He knew the Psalm ended with a vision of God’s grace.
But such hope did not deny or silence
the aching sadness that it is not yet,
still sadly not yet, God’s good future.
Christian hope does not make death or suffering “good,”
but in spite of sorrow it is nevertheless confident
that at the limits of this life
and in the withering of these bodies,
    God can still be trusted to be faithful.

**Love is patient.**

*Ars Moriendi* goes badly wrong, however,
    when it insists that to receive sickness and death with sorrow
    is a sign of not loving God sufficiently.
The cross does not make masochists of us.
And the love of God is not inconsistent
    with loving the world God loves
    or the bodies God gives
    or the “carnal” relations in which bodies inevitably involve us.
And if they are worth loving,
    then their loss is worth grieving.
This love is **displayed** in the affectionate affirmation
    of both God and the people who care for us and for whom we care,
    even as we lay dying.

**Without making death a good,**
    we may nevertheless learn **humility** from Jesus.
*Ars Moriendi* may have restricted its account of pride
    too much to the self-righteousness
    that pretends to have no need of God’s grace,
    but surely it is right to insist that **pride** gets in the way of dying well.
Pride pretends to self-sufficiency.
    Pride pretends to have no need
    of either the grace of God
    or the grace of another human being.
**It refuses to acknowledge neediness,**
    and it is therefore no good at gratitude.
As my mother used to tell me,
    and as the sage once said, “Pride goes before a fall” (cf. Proverbs 16:18).
Life frequently has a way of bringing down those who exalt themselves,
    but if life does not do it,
    dying surely will.
Dying inevitably reminds us of our neediness.
And the refusal to acknowledge our neediness
    makes not only gratitude difficult;
    it also makes it difficult
to receive the care of another graciously.

The temptation to pride may be an especially strong temptation in our culture, which places such an emphasis on autonomy and control.

We may exercise a condescending helpfulness to the “needy,” but we want it to be clear that we are not needy ourselves. That conceit can poison the work of caregivers. But pride can also poison the task of receiving care. It can make those in need of care ashamed of “being a burden” and resentful of those compassionate caregivers who remind us of just how needy we are. Then we cannot receive care graciously.

Such pride is finally folly. I have been a burden to those I love for quite a while now. To acknowledge gratefully our dependence upon God and upon other human beings is a mark of wisdom and a key to both living well and dying well.

Both living well and dying well take community. It is not good to die alone. Ars Moriendi knew that.

Ars Moriendi was also right in this: that attention to God and to the grace of God can nurture humility. Attentive to God, we can acknowledge our neediness and no longer fear it. Attentive to the grace of God, we need not pretend that it is our little righteousness that makes us worthy of God’s care (or anyone else’s) and we need not anxiously hoard the little resources we think we have against our vulnerability.

Thus pride is related to avarice, to the anxious tight-fistedness that is unwilling to let go of the things by which we think to establish our independence.
and our security against need.

That temptation, of course, was the final temptation of *Moriens*,
the anxious refusal to “let go.”
And there is something profoundly right in this.

The anxious refusal ever to let go,
whether of our possessions or of our family members
or of our friends or of life itself,
is sometimes closer to **idolatry** than to **affection**.

Let go of them, of course, we finally **must**.
Death will take them from us.
That is the threat of death.
To die is to be dispossessed,
to be sundered from the things and the people that we love.

And let go of them we finally **may**, for at the limit of our lives God may still be trusted.

With faith in God we can let even our selves go,
confident in God’s power and grace.
That confidence in God, with its attendant freedom from anxiety,
is the antidote for avarice.

The antidote proposed by *Ars Moriendi* is deeply flawed.
The antidote to this temptation is **not**
to deride or neglect the things and the people that God made good.
**On the cross** Jesus still showed his concern for his mother.

The problem is **not** that we love what God also loves,
and the solution is **not to love them less**.
The problem is to let go of that anxious tight-fisted grasping.
And the antidote for that anxiety, for this avarice,
is **not** to be found
in some disembodied and “spiritual” other world,
to which our souls will be transported.

The answer is to be found in the good future of God,
the kingdom of God,
the renewal and redemption of this world and these bodies.
The answer is to be found in God’s power and promise
to give life to the dust, to raise the dead.
God’s good future is sure to be.
It is God’s grace and power that secures our identity and our hope.
Then we can be **carefree, nonchalant**, even in the face of death. Then we can hear the command, “Be not anxious,” as a blessing. And we can let even ourselves go into the care of God.

All these virtues, faithfulness, hope, a love that is patient, humility, and serenity finally support another virtue, namely, **courage** in the face of death.

**Without commending death,**

we may nevertheless learn from Jesus that courage. His victory over death has robbed death of its sting, of its terrors. The resurrection assures us that we will not finally be alienated from our flesh or from the community, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Precisely because death will not have the last word, we need not always resist it. And because the triumph over death is finally not a technological victory, but a divine victory, we will resist not only the commendation of death but also the medicalization of death.

**Slide 20: Isenheim**

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1 Its popularity is demonstrated in the striking fact that about twenty per cent of the surviving block books (that is, books printed from engraved wood blocks) are are copies of the *Ars Moriendi*. (Dick Akerboom, “‘Only the Image of Christ in Us’: Continuity and Discontinuity between the Late Medieval *ars moriendi* and Luther’s Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben,” in Hein Blommestijn, Charles Caspters and Rijcklof Hofman, eds. *Spirituality Renewed: Studies on Significant Representatives of the Modern Devotion* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), pp. 209-272, 221.


3 It was a curious body, to be sure, but it was recognizable as Jesus’ body – as the body of the one who preached and healed and suffered. His wounds were raised with him. It was no mere “spirit” (Luke 24:40); this embodied person was identifiable – had an identity – in ways no mere “spirit” could. “It is I myself,” he said (Luke 24:40), “handle me, and see.”

4 The angel cited the hard words of Jesus against possessions and about “hating” those to whom we are tied with natural bonds of affection (Luke 14:33, 26). I take these hard words to be warnings against idolatry, and I acknowledge that the good gifts of God can be rendered idols, but I insist that they remain nevertheless good gifts of God. And I simply confess that I have never found the consolation of Matthew 19:19 about receiving “a hundred-fold” what we have left very consoling. I do not want a hundred wives.
I love the one I have. I do not want a hundred children. I love the ones I have. One or a hundred is not a substitute for the ones I love. With C. S. Lewis I “hope that the resurrection of the body means also the resurrection of what may be called ‘our greater body’; the general fabric of our earthly life with its affection and friendships.” C.S. Lewis, *Four Loves*, p. 187