



Remember your Death

MEMENTO MORI

Lenten Devotional

THERESA ALETHEIA NOBLE, FSP





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By Theresa Aletheia Noble, FSP



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Remember Your Death— Change Your Life

YOU ARE GOING TO DIE.

The moment you are born you begin dying. You may die in fifty years, ten years, perhaps tomorrow—or even today. But whenever it happens, death awaits every person, whether rich or poor, young or old, believer or nonbeliever. In *City of God*, Saint Augustine described the startling reality of death as “the very violence with which body and soul are wrenched asunder.” A terrifying prospect. So, it’s no wonder most people try to ignore their impending death or assume it is far in the future. However, ignoring death will not make it go away. And it may even increase anxiety—because the fearsome truth is that death could come suddenly and forcefully for anyone at any time. Only God knows when each person will die, so preparation for death is an essential spiritual practice, regardless of age.

Memento mori or “remember your death” is a phrase that has been long associated with the practice of remembering the unpredictable and inevitable end of one’s life. The spiritual practice of *memento mori* and the symbols and sayings associated with it were particularly popular in the medieval Church. But the tradition of remembering one’s death stretches back to the very beginning of salvation history. After the first sin, God reminds Adam and Eve of their mortality: “You are dust, / and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). God’s words continue to echo throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, reminding readers of life’s brevity, while exhorting them to remember their death. The Book of Sirach urges, “In whatever you do, remember your last days, / and you will never sin.” (7:36). The psalmist prays, “Teach us to count our days aright, / that we may gain wisdom of heart” (Ps 90:12). In the New Testament, Jesus exhorts his disciples to pick up their crosses daily and to remember their death as they follow him to the Place of the Skull: “if anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23).

Remembering one’s death is a practice that philosophers and spiritual teachers, both inside and outside of the Christian tradition, have encouraged for centuries. While the practice certainly can improve the quality of one’s earthly life by providing focus and motivation to live well, it could never overcome death itself. Death—whether the natural death of the body or the death of the soul through sin—has always been humanity’s most intimidating enemy and its most impossible adversary. Only the Creator of the Universe—the One who first

brought everything into existence and continues to maintain all living beings in existence—could overcome death. In the mystery of the incarnation, the Son of God humbled himself and took on human flesh in order to defeat death through his own death. Jesus has defeated humanity's greatest foe—permanent death in sin. All that remains for us to endure is bodily death. And Jesus has transformed even this fearsome reality into the doorway to heaven.

The Cross changes everything. With the triumph of the Cross, remembering one's death involves not only remembering one's mortality but also remembering Christ's victory over death: "Where, O death, is your victory? / Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor 15:55). If we belong to the Lord, we need not fear bodily death. Through his passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus has made salvation available to those who choose to enter into Christ's death, to be buried with him, and to rise with him to new life. Baptism banishes original sin and fills the soul with sanctifying grace—God's own life—that can be renewed and invigorated through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. At Mass, we consume the Eucharist, the Body of Christ. This Body is not the body of a corpse but, rather, the living, risen Body of our Savior who has vanquished death. The Eucharist is heavenly manna, and Jesus promised that it would lead us to heaven: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever" (Jn 6:51).

Even if one does not believe the Christian message of salvation, the rich, ancient tradition of remembering

death can bring joy, focus, and fruitfulness to anyone's life. However, for the Christian, it is a practice that extends beyond the reality of earthly life and bodily death. In the power of Jesus Christ, the Christian practice of *memento mori* reaches past the horizon of this life and into the eternal happiness of heaven. The power of the Cross amplifies the benefits of *memento mori* because the practice is fueled not merely by personal discipline but by God's abundant, living grace. As Christians, we remember our death in order to remember our Life: Jesus Christ. We remember our death in order that our lives may be filled with the Life of Christ, both now and when we enter into the joy of eternal life.

Remembering one's death is an absolutely essential aspect of the Christian life not only because it helps us to live well but also because it helps us to remember what Christ has done for us. Jesus trampled death! *Memento mori* is not a momentary trend but an ancient practice encouraged by Scripture, Jesus, the Church Fathers, and many of the saints. With the grace of God, *memento mori* has the power to change your habits and lead you to holiness. I hope you embrace this ancient and revered practice and make it your own. And always bear in mind: the practice of *memento mori* is more about living than it is about dying.

As you use this devotional, you will be in my prayers.

Remember your death,



Theresa Aletheia Noble, FSP

Live Memento Mori

REMEMBERING YOUR DEATH IS a deeply personal practice that can bring complex emotions to the surface. For this reason, it is important to thoughtfully integrate *memento mori* into your spiritual life. To aid you in this journey, this devotional has daily prompts for reflection activities and journaling. *Remember Your Death: Memento Mori Journal* is an available companion resource that you can use to respond to these prompts. The journal includes inspiring, original *memento mori* quotes as well as quotes from Scripture, Church Fathers, and the saints. The companion journal also contains a section of prayers related to *memento mori*. Whether you use the companion journal or not, it would be helpful to respond to the daily prompts in order to truly welcome the practice of *memento mori* into both your head and heart.

As you integrate *memento mori* into your life, you will find more fruit in the practice if you are also able to connect with those in the community of the Church who are on the same journey. Talk with family and close friends.

Share some of your reflections and reactions with the wider online community with the hashtags #memento-mori and #livemementomori. Death is the fate of every human being, but as Christians we also share the same hope of eternal life. Together on life's journey, we can help one another both to keep our death in mind and our eyes on Jesus.

The Memento Mori Daily Examen

At least once daily, cast your mind ahead to the moment of death so that you can consider the events of each day in this light.

—Saint Josemaría Escrivá

IN HIS RULE, SAINT BENEDICT urged his monks to “keep death daily before your eyes.” Benedict urged the remembrance of death so that his monks would live better in this life and keep their eyes on Jesus. Benedict also knew that the practice of remembering death is most effective when observed daily. This Lenten devotional will help you to begin the practice of remembering death daily, if you don’t already. But Lent will eventually end, and then you will have to find another way to remember death every day. For this reason, each

meditation in this devotional includes an *examen*, a time-honored practice that can be used to incorporate *memento mori* into your daily life.

For those new to it, the *examen* is a review of the day in light of God's love and mercy. Saint Ignatius of Loyola promoted the use of the *examen* to offer God praise and gratitude, identify areas of weakness in which God's help is needed, and to ask for grace for the future. This valuable spiritual practice has been encouraged in the Church for centuries because it has many benefits. The *examen* is a perfect way to incorporate *memento mori* into daily life since making an *examen* already implicitly evaluates the day in view of heaven. However, the version of the *examen* found below *explicitly* incorporates *memento mori* as a step in which you review the day in the context of your final hours.

How to Make the *Memento Mori* Daily Examen

Step One: Become Aware of God's Presence

Close your eyes and become present to God dwelling within you through your Baptism. Imagine yourself as a child under God's omniscient, compassionate gaze. Try to visualize yourself stepping out your self-centeredness in order to see reality through the loving eyes of God. This step is a crucial beginning to the

examen as God's perspective on our lives is the only important one.

Step Two: Ask for the Holy Spirit's Guidance

Offer a short prayer asking the Holy Spirit to help you to see the day in the light of God's grace.

Step Three: Review the Day

Ask the questions: "How has God loved me today?" and "How have I loved God and my neighbor today?" Sometimes an obvious moment in the day will jump out—positive or negative—and you can sit with it. However, this step is not like the examination of conscience before confession. Focusing on the negative may come more naturally, but try to note both the positive and negative events of the day and bring them before God in sorrow and thanksgiving.

Step Four: Remember Your Death

Consider the day in view of the last moments of your life. Envision your deathbed scene and reflect on whatever arose in the previous step in the context of eternal life. In this step, thank God for everything in the day that prepared you for heaven. Ask God for the graces you need to better prepare for the moment of your death, which remains unknown. Consider the question: "If I were to die tomorrow, what graces would I need from God?"

Step Five: Look Toward Tomorrow

End by looking forward to the next day. In this step, thank God for the gift of another day of life, should it be God's will. Think of the specific events of the following day, especially those for which you need particular graces. Visualize yourself trusting and acting in God's grace as you live both the trying and joyful moments of the next day. This step, if done faithfully, will lead to concrete behavioral and emotional changes in your life.

Note: At first, the *examen* may take about ten minutes, but once you get used to the practice it can be done in less time. Do not get caught up in doing the steps precisely; there are many different ways to do the *examen*. All that matters is that you get into the rhythm and spirit of the practice and see it bearing fruit.

Hopefully, by the end of Lent, remembering your death and making a regular *examen* will have become almost second nature and a powerful way to grow in holiness!

Let us prepare ourselves for a good death, for eternity.
Let us not lose our time in lukewarmness, in negligence, in our habitual infidelities.

—Saint John Vianney