



## THEOLOGY CORNER

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### “Why is Lent Surrounded by Themes about Death?”

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The season of Lent is noticeably surrounded by themes of death. Why is this? Is it the Church’s way of focusing on the negative, or is it in some way redirecting our thoughts toward something positive? I would say that it is more of the latter. Many Catholics are aware that the Lenten season places a special emphasis on prayer, fasting, reconciliation, and almsgiving. But, in what way do these things have to do with death? On Ash Wednesday, the people receive ashes on their foreheads to signify repentance and humility. We often hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.” This is definitely a statement about death. The reason behind this statement is that it serves as our *memento mori* – a reminder of our death (i.e., our mortality). It can certainly be a little unsettling to be asked to remember that you will die. In all honesty, it is meant to be unsettling. This reminder helps us to realize that we are nothing without God. All of our worldly desires and possessions may seem nice right now, but when you die, what good will they do? Thinking about death can help us to find that sense of urgency in knowing that the opportunity for repentance will only last so long. There will come a time when the possibility of true conversion is lost. We must change our sinful ways not tomorrow, but today. At the beginning of Lent, Catholics receive ashes on their foreheads as a sacramental - a sign meant to increase devotion and make us more receptive to grace.

This brings up an interesting thought – thinking about death can open up the opportunity to reflect upon our relationship with God and the very purpose of our life on this earth. We do have a tendency to shy away from thoughts about death, and in some sense, this is natural. It is natural because death, in and of itself, is evil. We don’t want to think too much about evil because we have a natural tendency to avoid it. But for the Christian, death is transformed. While death was not in God’s original plan when he created the human person, as St. Augustine regularly pointed out, God always acts to bring about a good out of an evil. In fact, this is all God can do, since he is goodness itself. So, what does God do? He takes the evil effect of death, and makes it a means through which we can enter into eternal life with him. It is actually quite the poetic act on God’s part! In light of the redemptive act of Christ, we see that Jesus turned the curse of death into a blessing by making it possible for us to die in grace so as to gain life with God for all eternity. In other words, Christ made death actually *mean* something! In dying, Christ performed the greatest act of charity; laying down his life for his friends so that they may, through him, be made in right relationship with God the Father, and share in a friendship of love by the power of the Holy Spirit. Death is not the *end* of life; rather, it is more like the *beginning*. When we mourn the death of a loved one, it is because we understand that their presence is good, and we miss the experience and joy of being in their presence. But when we are left into despair over the death of a loved one, it is often the result of a lack of faith in understanding what God accomplishes through death.

Another way to look at this is that Christ died out of love for us, and during the Lenten season, we reflect on this very intently. For if we can enter into the mystery of the passion and death of Christ, we can be able to properly respond in kind, by dying to ourselves spiritually out of love for him. This also calls to mind the need to enter deeper into the mystery of our baptism and the grace that the baptized receive to die to their old self and become reborn into a life of Christ. This perspective on death takes on a different dimension as it transforms into a matter of detaching from the things of the world, so that we can be filled with God — the true source of human happiness. But detaching from the world entails suffering. It is difficult to fast and to abstain from things that we enjoy. It is difficult to come to God in prayer and ask that his will be done instead of ours. It is difficult to seek reconciliation when we feel embarrassed by our sin or when we feel unworthy to be forgiven. It is even more difficult to actively seek reconciliation with someone who has wronged us. But we are called to do all of these things. Even though they are difficult, it is through this difficulty, that we find true freedom. Freedom does not come easily. St. Paul says, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is revealed to us...because creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Rom 8:18, 21). Let us not waste our sufferings, but allow the grace of Christ to make them redemptive – developing and sharing in the love of Christ and rediscovering ourselves through his love. As Catholics, then, we should stop running away from the thought of death. We should face it head on, reflecting upon this reality, thereby restoring an awareness of the very meaning of our life; to love God and our neighbor, as we make our pilgrimage from this earth to heaven. For it is in doing so, that we can live out the Gospel all the more perfectly, in a continual reminder that this life is temporary and that we are made for much more.