



Archdiocese of Philadelphia
Office of the Cardinal
222 North 17th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103-1299

September 6, 2011

Dear brother Priests,

Every assignment given us in the Church is only for a season, but it brings us closer to the fulfillment of our lives and ministry as priests of Jesus Christ.

At the summit of our priesthood is our Eucharistic celebration of the death of Jesus. We know that this sacramental celebration of His death must one day be linked, on the part of each of us, to the personal and free laying down of our life in death. In this way our Eucharistic ministry will find its completion and unite us forever to Christ's Resurrection.

At the end of my own ministry as your Bishop, I would like to share with you my reflection on the mystery of Christian and priestly death in its relationship to Christ's redemptive death. I think it is appropriate for us to meditate on this uplifting theme, which is so meaningful and challenging to all of us as priests.

My hope is that these thoughts may stir up in your hearts ever greater priestly generosity, fervor and joy.

In renewing to you my deep gratitude for your partnership in the Gospel, I assure you again of my love in Christ Jesus.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Justin Card. Rigali'.

Cardinal Justin Rigali
Apostolic Administrator

Attachment

Reflection of Cardinal Justin Rigali on the Mystery of Christian Death

Psalms 90 draws our attention to God's eternity and our human frailty, and hence to the mystery of death. We read: "Our guilt lies open before you; our secrets in the light of your face. All our days pass away in your anger. Our life is over like a sigh. Our span is seventy years or eighty for those who are strong... Make us know the shortness of life that we may gain wisdom of heart."

The topic of *death* is truly related to the resurrection of Jesus and to his victory. We are speaking about Christian death. We are speaking about our death. This means *the death of Jesus in each one of us* as it is renewed in a very real way at the moment of our own death.

Let us go back for just a moment to this great event: the death of Jesus. It was around midday. Darkness came over the whole land until midafternoon with an eclipse of the sun. The curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two. Jesus uttered a loud cry and said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." After He said this, He bowed His head and died.

The Power to Lay Down Our Life Freely

We know the power that Jesus possessed to lay down His life freely in death. We know that He exercised this power and that He has communicated this power to us. *It is exhilarating to reflect on the extraordinary power that is ours to be able to lay down our life freely.*

But before doing this, let us ask two questions: What did death mean to Jesus? What should it mean for us?

For Jesus, death meant the gift of Himself in total trust, in sacrifice, in suffering offered to His Father, in love, in obedience, in order to effect redemption. Even though He suffered enormously, *nothing gave Jesus greater satisfaction than to die* in order that the world would know, as He said, that He loves the Father and does what the Father willed. In death, Jesus obeyed the Father perfectly. In death He conquered death and won life for His Church. *The Father accepted Jesus' total gift and ratified its redemptive value by raising Jesus from the dead.*

What about us? Death is part of our lives. *Preparing for death is the greatest opportunity in our lives!* We have the possibility to rehearse our death, not in its minute details—although saints have found this useful—but in the sense of accepting it in anticipation by an act of our will that will be consummated freely at the moment of our death and offered to the Father in union with the death of Jesus. We can indeed accept and anticipate by an act of our will the laying down of our life in union with Jesus!

The Father wills that we pass through death—redeemed death—the death that is now linked not only with sin but also with the Death of Jesus and His Resurrection. The Father wills that we pass through death with His Son in order to live, not in order to die, and in order to make up in our flesh what is mysteriously wanting in the Passion and Death of the Lord. Seen in this perspective, *death is the moment to give all, to surrender all with Jesus and in union with His sacrifice.* All of

this can be anticipated by an act of our will, by an act of our love. When anticipated by an act of loving acceptance, death is an opportunity to say *yes* to the Father, just as Jesus did; to say *yes* with all our heart, as Jesus did.

Jesus first anticipated death at the moment of His Incarnation. We see these sentiments in the Letter to the Hebrews where He totally and completely accepted in anticipation the death that He was going to endure. Speaking to His Father, He said: "...a body you have prepared for me: holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight in. Then I said... 'I have come to do your will, O God'" (Heb 10: 5-7). Yes, Jesus anticipated death in the Incarnation and then fully embraced it at the hour of His cross.

A Magnificent Opportunity

Death is a magnificent opportunity to be able to make up for every lack of love in our lives, for every lack of obedience, for every lack of saying *yes*, for every sin that we have ever committed. But this final moment of our lives, even in its anticipation, in the act of love by which we accept it, is so special. *Now is the time to give all!* And if we do, there is joy and peace and love in obedience, in our act of final surrender, anticipated day after day in love.

Death is for all of us the act of our final oblation, the act of the final offering of ourselves. In consenting freely to our death, we are like Jesus: *we have power!* We have the power to lay down our life, exactly as Jesus did, exactly as Jesus said: "No one takes it from me; I lay it down freely; I have power to lay it down" (Jn 10: 18).

For us Christians, death is *the final renewal of our baptismal profession.* It is our final offering united to the Eucharist. It is the hour—especially when it is anticipated by many acts of the will—to assemble, and through Jesus to offer to the Father, all the acts of generosity in our lifetime, every *yes* that followed our call from the Lord and was ever expressed in our Christian life, every act of penance, every act of love that was ever manifested at any time in our youth, in our vocation, in our ecclesial mission!

This preparation for death, this act of the will on our part, this anticipation through love—call it what you will—also contains *a great power of expiation.* Consciously, lovingly, freely we say *yes* to the Father. We say *yes* to the definitive renunciation of our will in the most radical way possible. We accept to follow Jesus to the cross and we accept all the unknown details of a death that awaits us. We willingly ratify in advance everything in an act of love. We have power! We have the power to do this! At this moment we boast with Jesus: "I have the power to lay down my life!" He gave us this power. In this sense, no one takes it from us. We rob death by this act of our will of its ability to be only a punishment for sin. We lay down our life freely, in accordance with the Father's will. We lay it down radically, definitively, forever! Why? *So that sins may be forgiven!*

What is the conclusion to be drawn here? Truly, the acceptance of this disposition of the Father, the necessity of our dying in union with Christ, is *a special moment in our conversion.* It

can be a special moment every day. It can be a special moment renewed thousands of times. It is a special step to holiness. It is a special grace of sharing in Christ's risen life. It is a special moment, too, in every retreat. This anticipation of death gives us immense joy! It gives joy to our lives. It confirms us in fervor and in love.

What Our Death Means to the Father

There are other exhilarating aspects to our death, not only what it means to us but *what our death means to the Father*. This is an ineffable mystery! I have spoken about our anticipation and acceptance of death. For the Father, the death of each of us is the re-enactment of the death of Jesus. We have been sacramentally configured to his Son in Baptism and some of us in Holy Orders; we have received Him so many times in the Eucharist; we have met Him in the moment of the triumph of His Blood in the sacrament of Penance. The Father sees all of this, and in that hour of our death He sees and accepts our death as the death of Jesus. He sees our death as united with the death of Jesus through Baptism and the Eucharist. We have been configured to the Lord Jesus and we have received the right to rise with Him and to participate fully in the Paschal Mystery.

When the Father sees our death, our pain, our sacrifice, our resignation, our joyful and obedient acceptance, He can see nothing else but *the death of His Son Jesus*. In virtue of His gift to us of divine adoption, He can say: "My Jesus!" There is no other reality that exists for the Father because, before the world began, He generated us in His Word, in His Eternal Word, and He predestined us to share in the Paschal Mystery of the crucified and risen Jesus.

Seeing our death, which is the consummation of our Baptism, our vocation, and for some of us our Priesthood and our Episcopacy, and seeing the death of Jesus in this death of ours, the Father is moved to apply to us personally the full salvific power of the cross and resurrection. He acknowledges and He proclaims in Himself, in the communion of the Blessed Trinity, that His Son Jesus is definitively our Savior, that the Blood of the Lamb is gloriously victorious. This is, of course, *the most sublime aspect of our death and its preparation*. There is nothing comparable to *what our death means to the Father*.

Radical Surrender in Joyful Hope

Yet, there are other aspects, wonderful aspects which fill our souls with joy at the thought of death and at the possibility that we can prepare so personally, so often, with such freedom and such love. We know that our Blessed Mother, Mary, will be with us at the hour of death: the Queen of Angels, the Queen of Saints, the Mother of the Word Incarnate, the Mother of the Church, our Mother Mary. It will be *her last maternal act* in our regard. It will be the consummation of the love with which she loved us in her Son and kept us from the evil one and accompanied us in all our needs during life. It will be for her the hour of her supreme fidelity toward us when once again, hearing the words of Jesus on Calvary—"Woman, behold your son." (Jn 19:26)—she will express at our death the sentiments of Jesus speaking to His Father, and they will become her words: "They belonged to you and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word" (Jn 17:6).

In that hour, Saint Joseph, too, will exercise his intercession for our holy death as *patron of the dying*. He will respond to the call of the Church to be with us, to intercede for us. As Jesus becomes definitively our Savior in the hour of our death, Joseph will recall how it was he and Mary,

who acting on instructions from the angel, gave the child the name of Jesus, which means *Savior*. Now, this is coming to pass exactly as it was foreordained. In Saint Luke's Gospel, in the Annunciation, we have the angel telling Mary that she would call Him Jesus. In the Gospel of Saint Matthew, the angel goes directly to Joseph and says, "You will call his name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). Here is the moment of culmination when Jesus is Savior for each one of us, and Mary and Joseph acknowledge this in praise to the Father.

Death is the *last act of our baptismal and priestly commitment*, the final contribution that we will make to the mission of the Church until our voices join the Liturgy of Heaven and are associated with the Lamb and His Saints in intercession for the living.

This brings us to still another point that inspires us in joyful hope as we await the blessed hour of our death. The moment of our death is *the true conclusion of the matrimonial graces given to our beloved parents*. Only with the final triumph of our death is their work completely achieved. All the graces that emanated from their sacramental union are now fully effective.

Why evoke all this? Because it is so intimately connected with the Paschal Mystery in us and to the Lord's call to conversion, holiness and life! The death of Jesus in us and in our death is *the cause of our resurrection and eternal life*. We are called to embrace our death in order to live, to live for God in Christ Jesus our Lord. A conscious anticipated acceptance of our death in union with Jesus renewed a thousand times in our lives is the loving repetition of an act of surrender to the will of the Father. It is a radical surrender, a total surrender. It is the expression of total openness on our part to let the Paschal Mystery of Jesus possess us in the embrace of all-consuming love. For this to happen death is the condition for us, just as death was the condition for Jesus to enter into His glory.

We have power to offer with Jesus to the Father all the pain and anguish and suffering, and especially the separation of body and soul that takes place in death, as our sacrifice of love and obedience and reparation for our sins. Because our sacrifice is fused with that of Jesus, it will have *redemptive value for the salvation of the world*. Our death will have sanctifying value for the Church.

At His death, Jesus uttered seven words. Two of them were particularly personal to him. He called upon His Mother and His Father. In speaking to Saint John, He said: "Son, behold your mother" (Jn 19:27). Finally he cried out, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!" (Lk 23:46). We desire to die invoking Mary and enjoying her maternal relationship, just as Jesus did at the hour of His death. We also ardently desire to die presenting ourselves to the Father as brothers and sisters of Jesus, and some of us as His priests and Bishops.

Our Last Proclamation, Our Last Invocation

At that final hour, if God gives us consciousness, we hope to make *the last great proclamation of our lives*. We can rehearse it; we can anticipate it so many, many times! This last great proclamation of our lives is all contained in the one word *Jesus* by which we express our trust

in Him—*Jesus, I trust in you!*—whom we proclaim the Savior, our Savior, Mary’s Son and the eternal and beloved Son of the Father. He is the Eternal Word, the firstborn from the dead, the risen Lord who will raise us up in glory to be with the Father and Holy Spirit, with Himself, in the communion of the Most Blessed Trinity, forever.

Following our last *proclamation*—the holy name of *Jesus*—we still aspire to make one last *invocation*. It is the word *Father*. We have been configured to the Son of God, who is the Son of Mary. We have been redeemed by His Precious Blood, nourished by His word and sacraments, loved by His Mother, assisted by His Church. And now the moment has come to be presented by Jesus to His Father in the communion of the Holy Spirit. Our identification with Jesus has been finalized. The only word left to utter is *Father*: “Father into your hands I commend my spirit.” Our identification with Jesus is complete. The Father accepts us as Jesus, as His only Son, forever.

When the hour of death comes, we may not be conscious. It may come very suddenly, by reason of an accident, by reason of a heart attack; there are a million and one possibilities left to our imagination but this does not matter. The point is: *the surrender will have been made thousands of times!* The Father will understand that each of us had the power, which we exercised, the power, with His Son Jesus, to lay down our life freely, lovingly and definitively. Then there will be no obstacle to the consummation of our love. Life and holiness will be ours forever in the communion of the Most Blessed Trinity. Amen.