



# Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

WITNESS

## Issue Two

### A Birth Unto Hope: Reflections on the Gospel of Life at Death

SISTER MARIA OF THE TRINITY

“*Duc in altum*—Put out into the deep!” With these words, St. John Paul II opened his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*—“At the Dawn of the New Millennium,” calling the faithful of this time in history to go to the depths, “to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence.” In my years of living with the dying, it has been clear that unless we go to the depths, as in the *De Profundis*, Psalm 130, “Out of the depths I have cried unto Thee, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice,” we lose out on the opportunity to experience the heights, the joys, the peace, and the confirmation of a life lived well in preparation for the next life. This is the *birth unto hope*<sup>11</sup> as I Peter 1:3–9 declares: the affirmation that, following in the footsteps of Christ, our labor, patient endurance, and suffering become indeed the keys that open the doorway to more abundant life.

A friend once shared with me about the birth of her second child. Because the birth of her first child had resulted in emergency surgery, she now hoped and planned for a calm, natural delivery. During the latter stages of labor, she recounted feeling the acute pain and anxiety of what seemed an impossible passage. “*I don’t know what to do*,” she whispered from the bedside to her sister, who had traveled a long distance to the hospital to provide coaching support, and who herself was a physician experienced with delivering babies. Her sister explained that she needed to wait, that in a few moments her body would relax, and then it would be time. This information gave the young mother the needed confidence to simply wait, and she was amazed at how a few minutes later, her body did suddenly and radically change, and she was then much more easily able to deliver the baby into the doctor’s hands.

When we speak of “life at death,” I affirm that our passage from this world to the next is also a life event, even though it involves our death and not the result of a little baby being born. It is a birthing process that must be accompanied. We need to be attentive to the vulnerability of that time, both physically and emotionally, as well as psychologically and spiritually. For this we need a family, and we need companions. We need collaboration and accompaniment; we need not to be alone, because *we do not know how to do it*.

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The preparation for a good and happy death is made more possible when we possess a fundamental awareness that we come into this world in God's timing, and that we will leave this world in God's timing. We can then trust in a God who has known us before we were born, loves us, has a plan and a purpose for our life, has gone to prepare a dwelling place for us, and will come to get us when it is the right time—the right time for Him, for us, and for our loved ones. Even if we are not old or infirm, the knowledge of Whose we are and Who waits for us with love, not minimizing the fact that there is a judgment and that we will be called to give an account, makes today really matter. With the choices we make, the relationships we form and nurture, and the foundation on which we build, we can start at this moment to prepare, welcoming the little deaths in our life, our daily dying that helps us be ready to ultimately surrender.

This desire for life at death would seem impossible without the gifts of faith, hope, and love that I have experienced in *my thirty-five years of consecrated life*. At *Gospel of Life Disciples and Dwellings*, this is what we strive to share as a community of lay and consecrated persons, providing care for those at the end of this life's journey, whether due to age or terminal illness, and who, in most cases, have no family and resources. Throughout the past ten years of our work in Oklahoma and Texas, I have seen many people who struggled all throughout their lives and then end up, by God's mercy and grace, having happy, holy deaths in our dwellings. But they would not have had that experience without other human beings who affirmed the dignity of their life and witnessed to them the love of God. Because death is a critical and sacred moment, life-affirming care of the dying requires patient discernment and a willingness to go to the depths at the service of God's plan for each and every person.

Gospel of Life Disciples and Dwellings (GOLD) is a response to a call received for a time such as now. Blessed with a family and a religious community that formed me and witnessed to the beauty and the dignity of each stage of life, God has given me this "call within a call," asking me to particularly concentrate on this last leg of the journey. This is not a baton that has been passed only to me, but it is a team effort, one that is being shared by an array of people of different backgrounds, experiences, and talents. As such, it is in harmony with Pope John Paul II's call for a "spirituality of communion," knowing that each person is unique and unrepeatable, and that, in addition to shared prayer and the daily pursuit of holiness, we seek always to "make room for our brothers and sisters and to bear each other's burdens."

For however short or however long we have been blessed to have someone with us at GOLD, we learn from each other, whether as caregiver or the one receiving care, since we experience daily common life together as a Gospel family in our dwellings. We all have something to contribute, and so these varied gifts, personalities, and backgrounds only add to the rich texture of the accompaniment we offer to the dying.

A battle is currently raging, but it is not even being recognized as such. We need to fight a good fight in order to enable people to have a truly good death. This means each person is allowed to live that time of his life with support in his vulnerability and help in his need, the same help we give to those in childbirth. This is an ultimate labor of love, and when we do not run from it

or mask it or snuff it out, life at death is precious and beautiful.

It is important to state definitively that our lives have been received as a gift. They are ours, but they are not our own. Our current culture's unbalanced emphasis on autonomy does not want to admit this truth. We are *stewards* of this gift, and yet a relativistic, secularistic approach to death is "I decide." The deaths based on this prevailing attitude have been, as I have witnessed, fraught with the biggest dangers. These are the least happy deaths.

The true nature of palliative and hospice care is one of cooperation and collaboration, treating pain and addressing distressful symptoms. It means helping each individual in a personalized, adapted way. Alleviating pain does not mean eliminating the person. Pain is not only physical. There is also psychological, spiritual, and emotional pain. All of this comes to the forefront when we are confronted with our mortality, with the reality that our lives are coming to an end. If we are blessed with this awareness, then there is an opportunity to make amends, to take care of unfinished business, to right wrongs, to say we are sorry. This part of the journey should not be taken from the person. Each one needs to be able to surrender oneself in hope, with a sense of integrity looking back over one's life, to be able to hear, even in one small area of one's life, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master" (Mt 25:23).

There has never been anyone, no matter the prison record, the family record, the wounds, the baggage, and the bridges burned that I have cared for at the end of life who has not been able to leave this world in peace, knowing that there has been something good in and through his or her life—if the person has honestly been open and taken the time given. And this does take time, and sometimes it is the other people who are impatient. Sometimes there is fear, but when time is given to really accompany, listen, share, and assist in a way that is true, a way that is not assisted suicide, but *assisted living*, then momentous and beautiful changes can happen. I have seen it. It is grace-filled, and truly, it is God's love at work.

This is not to make it all sound lovely and idyllic. It is hard work, as is a birthing experience, but it is so worth it. It takes humility and trust to wait, to let one's death be God's timing and not ours.

There is currently an imminent danger, one which is unfortunately already a reality in many places, which is that, in the name of "comfort care," persons are overmedicated and robbed of their consciousness before it is time, before it is God's time. We should remember that the origin of the word comfort (from Latin *com-fortis*) means "to give strength." Thus, true comfort care at the end of this life's journey is to help each person find strength through our presence, our prayer, and our care.

It would be a terrible disservice if the current trend to take an easier way out by broadly applying protocols that are not uniquely designed to an individual's need end up tarnishing hospice and palliative care, all because these practices (false "comfort care") come to be seen as they are: wielding death. There is an urgent need for a wake-up call to restore the right place and the right way of accompanying those at the end of life.

As with so many we have cared for, this careful accompaniment was important for a man we recently welcomed. He had arrived on a stretcher in pain, suffering from lung cancer that had metastasized to the brain and bone. His physical pain needed relief and he received that. But beyond that, he was able, with much assistance, to get out of bed and to be taken outside. He was able to spend time in the sunshine, to share meaningful moments with his pastor, and with his daughters who flew in to be with him. He had the time to make phone calls, to reach out, to tell people he was dying. Very quickly after that, his physical condition did change, and

it was clear, even as he became unconscious, that there was a deep peace. He needed that last week to truly experience his life at death.

The key to life at death is not to waste, short-circuit, or miss any person's story or place of need. We must use deep discernment to do this work. Just as the woman's body knows how to give birth, the body knows how to prepare for death if we will but let it.

To neither prolong nor hasten death is then our mission. For this, Jesus is our way, our truth, and our life. "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Jesus shows us that this abundant life is not from wealth or the pursuit of worldly goods but is in the context of laying down His life, His victory over all that could "steal, kill, and destroy." Few people today would associate "abundant life" with the image of frailty and dependence due to advanced age or terminal illness. However, for those of us blessed to assist the dying, we regularly witness abundant life at death through the encounter with residents from all walks of life. This is the reality (and paradox!) of Christianity: a grain of wheat that dies to bear fruit, the Good Shepherd who sacrifices His life for the flock, the innocent and humble Jesus who died a criminal's death, at the same time birthing in us the possibility of eternal life. This abundant life is not only for later, but it begins now and continues at the hour of death.

St. Paul affirms that "the sufferings of the present moment are nothing as compared to the glory to be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18). When we accompany the dying, and see how, because of Jesus, we can unite our sufferings with His, we know redemptive suffering is possible. We do not blithely say, however, "Well, just offer it up" and leave someone in pain; instead, we seek to find the origin of the pain, whether it be social, psychological, physical, or spiritual, and then we provide assistance and walk with that person, by God's grace, with His help, and according to His time.

The evolution of vocabulary is important here. I find it interesting that a word like agony, coming from the ancient Greek *agōnia*, meaning "a struggle for victory," now suggests only something that is seen as highly undesirable, especially for the dying. Agony, as Christ showed us by his example in the garden of Gethsemane, is, in the Christian context, preparing us for something greater. We are indeed called to struggle for ultimate victory. And the word euthanasia in Greek (*euthanatos*) once meant "a good death," but it now means either the legally sanctioned practice of putting someone to death, or the stealth practice of terminating someone's life. This is happening more and more today, even in states where it is not legal. Legal or not, murder is never moral, and it is not a "good death."

Today, the struggle for life is everywhere. As John Paul II said in *Evangelium Vitae*, there must be an urgent and renewed awareness that each life is intrinsically valuable, that every human life is sacred and has inviolable dignity. We need to receive our life as a gift from our Creator, and live our lives according to His will, His way, His plan. We are at the service of this truth as we accompany life from womb to tomb.

Many people working with the dying are among the most compassionate, beautiful people I know, but there is deviation from the truth when someone decides: "Well, it is time," or "they wouldn't want to live like this," and then takes decisions into their own hands, usurping control. God alone is the Author of life and alone should have this power and prerogative. Humility, trust, and surrender, with the acknowledgement of God as sovereign, is our only safeguard. And that does not mean pushing religion on anyone, but it does mean knowing our fundamental reality as creatures, along with recognizing the inalienable value of each person as created by an all-knowing, all-loving eternal Creator.

If the question of life after death has not been asked, it will be. This is where time, truth, and

freedom of real accompaniment is necessary. “The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23). In all my years of being with persons at the end of their life, I have never met an atheist on his death bed. Deep down, each person wants that gift of God because each person is made for eternal life with God.

For those who have not known God, or who have ignored God, or who have fallen away from God, when faced with the existential reality of one’s own mortality, an openness ensues, and one often becomes more receptive to the gift of God. Simple but steady incarnated love and care from fellow pilgrims on this journey yields possibility for transformation and a desire to live more fully now, and forever. This is, however, neither automatic nor easy. We must always choose life.

During a difficult recent accompaniment, a man we cared for died in the Sacred Heart Room, one of the many named rooms in our two dwellings. One of our caregivers reflected: “There are two ‘hallways’ that lead to this room. One may be filled with anger, resentment, and unforgiveness, and one may be filled with grace, mercy, goodness, and prayer. This man died in the Sacred Heart. Both halls still led to complete surrender, and he was ushered out of the room as we were singing ‘Amazing Grace.’”

Lizzy, as a live-in missionary disciple and part of our *Gospel of Life School*, remembers caring for my own father when we brought him to our dwelling during the height of the pandemic in the final year of his life. She recalled:

Bill was a man of great faith, and in his final days, I remember feeling extremely blessed when, on hearing someone at the table mention it was my birthday, he looked up at me and lifting his hand, he made the Sign of the Cross over me. A few days before his passing, I was blessed to sing at his bedside when he seemed to have lost much awareness. Suddenly he sat up, looking upwards, and with great clarity he said, “I feel I have traveled 10,000 steps high.” In that moment, it seemed to me that Bill was experiencing some sort of culmination of the many choices he had made in his life, and that perhaps God was showing him how all his seemingly small acts of virtue as a husband and father were the ladder by which he was being lifted up towards heaven. I do not think it was a coincidence that I had been singing to him the song, “Angel Band,” in which the lyrics ask the angels to “bear me away on your snow-white wings, to my immortal home.”

What we do and who we are at GOLD is rooted in the deep truth that each person wants to be known and loved. It is a question of relationship. We are called to share in the relationship of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in an eternal relationship of love. That is what Heaven is. In our community, we prepare for this ultimate relationship through our day-to-day relationships, through daily life shared together, including community dances and feasts, speaker series and book studies, celebrations of birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, and finally, celebrating birth to eternal life. In a tangible way, we hope to see that we are made for love both now and forever.

“There is a time in life, right before the end,” wrote Eva, who also lived as a missionary disciple at our St. John Paul II Dwelling in Moore, OK,

that is kind of like the sunset we watch from our porch out back. Unfettered, nearing the close of day, the sun dazzles us with its last colors of brilliant pink

and orange and red, leaving nothing unsaid, nothing unlived. I think the end of life is like that. Like the sunset, which can be blocked out, obscured, or ignored, people at the end of life many times do not get the privilege to live that special time before death. When I painted *Will You Stay and Watch the Sunset with Me*, I dug into a piece of drywall to illustrate the fragility and the threats to end of life care. I chose vignettes of people I've known, living their sunset intensely after nearly having it taken from them. Because they still have life yet to live.



Eva Engelland-Spohn, "Will You Stay and Watch the Sunset with Me"

My heartfelt plea and profound prayer is for all members of our culture and society to treasure this time of sunset. May we give of our time, attention, and resources to the end of life, rather than having someone think, "I'd be better off dead" or "I'm a burden draining the system." The end of life does not have to be expensive, but it is *costly* in terms of time, attention, love, and care.

My brother Mark, who has been involved with our ministry from the beginning and who is also a deacon, shared his observations of the dying, the summation of this precious fight for life:

I have been blessed with being at the bedside of multiple people as they are preparing to depart this world and enter the next. And in the normal context of the human experience, a person looking back on a life of ups and downs, it is profoundly clear that the spiritual world is vying for the treasure of our souls right up until the end. The spirits of Light beckon to us to join them, and the evil spirit works to prey on a person's regrets and flaws and stumblings, to instill fear about the future and push a person to shame and a sense of unworthiness, and ultimately to catalyze despair in order to win the soul for darkness. To observe this dynamic is to truly get a sense of, and to have affirmed, the immeasurable value of our souls, a value so dear, that there would be such a battle for them right until the end.

But, when someone either has deeply rooted Faith, or is verbally reassured by a

prayerful disciple of our Lord at their bedside, and is reminded that no flaw, no stumbling, no sin is bigger than the Lord's infinite Love and Mercy, then the overt peace that flows and overwhelms the darkness is stunning and obvious. Agitation and angst turn to a calm and confident release into the life of the Spirit and opens the person up to the warm embrace of our Savior, and to the joy of the angels and saints, who are waiting to shower unimaginable love on the new citizen of Heaven as they participate in Glory. It is an experience of awe and Grace.

*GOLD recently celebrated its 10th anniversary. Please click [here](#) to see a commemorative book of the past decade and [here](#) to listen to *As I Have Loved You*, a collection of songs recorded by some members of the Gospel of Life School.*

[1] *The Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol IV, Psalter: Sunday, Week III, 959, Reading from I Peter 1:3–5, Catholic Book Publishing Corp., N.Y., 1975. Biblical Readings reproduced with permission from *The New American Bible*, Copyright 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington D.C.



“Sister Maria,” Igor Babailov (Babailov.com)

