

# Embracing the Future

by Giles Hibbert O.P. (died 28.12.2013)

NOTE

by *Fabian Radcliffe OP*

*Giles wrote this paper in February 2007. He had, as he says, been diagnosed with cancer of the liver. In the event this turned out to be a misdiagnosis; but he did not know this at the time of writing, and he felt the need to think more intently about death, its pain and its timing, and about purgatory. Sometime around then, he and I had a conversation in which he mulled over many of his thoughts in the paper, and he gave me a copy of it. But after that we never talked any more about it. I had the impression that once he knew that the threat of death by cancer had passed, he put the paper aside and did not work on it any more, or show it to anyone else, so far as I am aware. So what he wrote here is a provisional expression of his thinking, and to be fair to him we must remember this, and not treat it as a fully considered expression of his views. He would surely have made many alterations before publication. Just what he would have said on hearing that the paper had been made public in its original draft is best left to the imagination! I only hope he will forgive me for sharing his still roughcast thoughts with readers of *The Newman*, and through them with others. If it encourages us all to treat these matters thoughtfully and honestly, and in a truly Catholic spirit, then I am sure he will be pleased. The text is just as he wrote it, and I have simply added a few explanatory footnotes.*

A friend and colleague of mine was heading for a rather nasty death, one of those motor neurone illnesses in which one becomes more and more paralysed. We were worried that he might be tempted to bring life to a close artificially before the horrors actually began to hit him; he had once before, some time back, made an attempt at suicide, but that I am sure was a “cry for help” rather than anything else – a cry which was heard and answered. But in fact he rose well above all our fears and died peacefully in a hospice.

But how “wrong” would it have been if he had decided to accelerate things? It has been the *firm* Christian tradition that to bring one’s own life to an end (*viz.* suicide) is wrong under all circumstances; and to aid someone in doing this is, in our society, a criminal offence: murder. There are many “Christian trad-itions”, however, which seem firm and irrevocable which are in fact traditions simply because “this is what we have always done/said/thought/etc.” – slavery, torture, usury, homosexuality (*vide my A Syllabus of Cherries – A Credo for a Third Millennium Catholic*, CCC Publications 2007, for comments on other “firm” traditions).

I myself have personally wondered about this. Supposing the USA should make a nuclear attack on Iran, and then Russia and/or China join in. The resultant effects would be to take us back more or less into the Dark Ages. Would all those pain killers which I need to survive at the moment, due to the PHN from which I suffer, still be available? Other things – mere survival – would perhaps be more important. Could I cope without them? Already as it is I spend quite some time screaming with the pain. Would I be justified under such circumstances in taking my own life? I do not know – “the firm Christian tradition” is not really strong enough to give me a reliable answer. So, and here is a confession, I have in fact kept back from my medication over the years what I believe to be effectively a fatal dose of morphine. It would probably not work because such a dose – it is oral – might well induce nausea; it would be a waste of my tablets! At any rate, I have passed through that phase and am relatively happy about it. The “temptation” (if that is what it is) has at least temporarily vanished.

It just so happens, now however, that I may well be saved from having to face this problem. I have just been diagnosed with cancer of the liver – probably with further multiple complications in the associated organs<sup>1</sup>. I am likely, if I let “nature take its course”, to be dead long before my pain killers run out! On the other hand, if I do *not* let nature take its course but “fight” the cancer with prayer and will-power, and of course with radiological treatment and chemotherapy, what might be the result? I *might* be cured completely; I *could* be given an extra year or two of life – life at a rather low level – or perhaps just a month or two’s extension. Is refusing such treatment, and thus in effect bringing one’s life to an earlier end, tantamount to suicide? Is it inevitably wrong – or wrong at all? I do not think so.

### Two different scenarios

There are in general terms, however, two different scenarios within which this question might actually have to be asked. Speaking roughly, is the person concerned single or partnered? This latter might be restated more significantly as: “Does anyone radically depend on them?” The two cases are obviously rather different. Where someone has dependents, whether in need of their physical, financial or emotional support, then I think it is clear that considerable attention should be given to the means available for “fighting” the illness – taking into account, of course, the relative pain, discomfort, etc. involved – to both parties. [I am thinking here of my brother-in-law who, in his early 80s, is fighting leukaemia with some inconvenience to his own comfort, most probably on account of my sister’s current need of him for support. He might of course equally be being treated for the sake of a more comfortable death – to alleviate some of the symptoms. I do not believe him to be afraid of dying.]

I am not personally, however, concerned with this “dependency set-up”; I am by contrast *in a sense* single. I say “in a sense” because I am not alone, responsible only to myself, since I belong to the Dominican Order, the “Order of Friars Preachers”. The tie is strong and affectionate, and to a considerable extent successful – I am, after all, from those joining, amongst that minority which are “still here” and still working as a Dominican! The Dominicans are my family and without the relationship which I have with them I would not know how to be a Christian or a Catholic. [The vision given to me by Columba Ryan fifty years ago is still valid and vital.<sup>2</sup>]

But, although I can still work for them, proclaiming the Gospel as befits a member of the *Order of Preachers* – though with, alas, increasingly diminishing frequency and vigour – nevertheless their work in no way effectively depends upon me. I have served the Gospel through them for more than fifty years and I feel that at the age of 78 I could do with a “rest” – if that is what it is to be! Such an age, although perhaps a little on the low side for nowadays, is what one must at least call a “respectable innings”; I do not need to fight for more. Would it be “all right” to die at 80, but not at 78? I conclude from this that, without in any way being selfish, in this context all my consideration should be for myself. Of course I have friends who will be sad when I go – but that is so in any way, at any time – now or in 4, 5, or 6 years’ time. There is no one with regard to whom I am indispensable. There is no one to whom I owe a fight for further “unnatural” survival. I am already winding down (in some ways alarmingly), there’s not much more that can be got out of me.<sup>3</sup>

There are those who desperately fight for life, “just a little bit more” – it is “all that they

have". [Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, or perhaps it is Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, has a good description of the condemned man being taken to his execution, who at each turning of the route sees what is ahead as the whole of the life left to him – he still has this, even if it's only minutes. It was very much like that, I remember, when (miserably) I was on my way back to boarding school at the end of each holiday.]

Why are people frightened of death? In the case of those who do not believe there is anything else, they seem to think they will have lost out; they feel cheated dying. But who is it that they are thinking of? If that is the end of them, who is it that is missing out? Who is it that will be there to worry about it? Of course, if the death is going to be painful, that is another matter, but it is clear that even believing Christians often think of their lives as "all that they have", every end-moment is to be grasped at. "I don't want to die!" Why not? Surely, for a Christian (possibly for any enlightened human being, cf. Socrates as presented in Plato's *Phaedo*), it is a very exciting adventure: a setting out on a *new and wonderful enterprise*.

[As a result of a request originating in Trinidad it was suggested to me, in 1979, that I should leave Oxford, where I was lecturing in theology, and go out to the Caribbean to take part, from what one might call a Liberation Theological point of view, in ideologically assisting the somewhat unstable New Jewel Movement revolutionary government of Grenada, and help our people stationed out there to understand them. It would mean a total change of lifestyle for me, leaving all my carefully hoarded goods and comforts – appropriate for an Oxford lecturer but perhaps not for a *friar*: my books, my hi-fi and all my LPs – and start afresh with nothing but my personal expertise and knowledge, and my being a Christian within the Dominican Order. It was indeed somewhat daunting, but what a challenge! I was eager to go, but fortunately or unfortunately, sadly or otherwise, the project fell through for reasons of political confusion unconnected with myself. What a challenge and adventure it would have been! – perhaps one through which I would not have survived.]



Giles Hibbert O.P.

### **An adventure**

I can't help *regarding dying somewhat like that* – an adventure and a challenge. Now, I believe very firmly in the doctrine of Purgatory in relation particularly to this current topic. I do not mean that aspect of the tradition connected with indulgences and the like which was so disastrous for Christian credibility just before the Reformation, but something much more fundamental and important. I will make use of and partially quote from my own *A Syllabus of Cherries – A Credo for a Third Millennium Catholic* to explain what I mean.

We are called upon, as Christians, to "die with Christ so that we might rise with him" (Rom 6:5) – Paul is arguing against those who say there is no resurrection. The first point to stress in all this is that our salvific grace comes *entirely* from God, *through* his Son, our Saviour. [How we have ever given the Protestants reason to doubt this I am

totally unable to understand – unless it is because of the over-devotion which we have in times past given to Mary and the Saints.] It is within this context of Jesus' healing grace that we are purified and healed. But Jesus has chosen us to be his friends, not servants (Jn 15:14-15), effectively his brothers and his sisters – so as to share with him both his divine and his human life.

In no way, however, and this is the second point to stress, does God treat us as *puppets*; in no way does he *force* anything upon us; both in life and in death he treats us fully as the human beings *whom he has made in his own image*, to live in companionship with him. Thus if we are to “die with Christ in order to rise with him”, it is we who have to do the dying – through his sacrifice and with his grace – it isn't an automatic process, either imposed or imputed. It is a sharing of life, which is what the Resurrection, and everything that led up to it, implies. “Purgatory” is as it were “quasi-mythological” (and has only unfortunately been a “quasi-legalistic”) way of talking about the process of this “dying to self”.

### **A flash of timelessness**

Here, presumably in a flash of timelessness, one is confronted, in some way or other, with all those whom one has hurt; confronted with all the times and ways that one has put oneself first, either in aggression or through laziness. In this confrontation one is healed by the loving presence of the Christ who stands by one as friend, teacher and healer (of each individual as well as of the whole of humankind.) It is not something one has to “do” on one's own – nor could one. So Purgatory is not just to be seen as passive – something done to one, a necessary cleansing – it is something which involves one's having to respond to those whom one has hurt; one has to meet the challenge of being healed through them, in Christ. So why not say of dying “*What a challenge! – even if a somewhat alarming one?*” Why not be able to say “I look forward to dying – however painful this experience of ‘purgatory’ is spiritually going to be”? Would I be wrong, then, if I were offered radiation or chemotherapy to delay the effects of cancer, to refuse it? Would I gain anything, in physical or in spiritual comfort, by accepting it, hoping for a few more months? (Hoping that some such treatment might be able to give a more physically “comfortable” death is another matter.) To live a little longer – I admit that I would like to see the Spring again, the leaves budding on the trees opposite my windows, the cowslips and the orchids up in the hills above here. (They both love the limestone which is a characteristic of the White Peak – though here we are where the Dark and the White Peak meet and intermingle.)<sup>4</sup> But let it be; they will go on flowering whether I am here or not.

I would also very much like once again to celebrate Easter at Llanidloes as planned; but again, let it be, that is in God's hands. It would be good to reach the Dominican Peace and Justice Conference once again in Clun – where they want me to give a paper. It would be nice to die here, at home, rather than in something like a hospice, but that might be a serious cause of inconvenience to others. It does not really matter on my account; that is all relatively insignificant. The great thing is dying.

It is better, I think, to say “dying” rather than “death”; the former is positive, the latter is somewhat negative. Dying authentically is rather like building a bridge – constructive and creative, a leap forward towards something new, the other side. [As a young man, just qualified as a civil engineer, bridge-building (relatively small ones at that time) was

one of my major pleasures!]

Dying is the normal, natural conclusion to our lives, to be welcomed with excitement. But is cancer “natural”? Many people, I’m afraid, regard cancer as an “invasion from without” and therefore to be fought from that point of view rather than from any other. But it isn’t. There may be causes from without, but in a sense it is natural to the body – sometimes indeed questionably so, but often its “proper *telos*”. [This may be an oversimplistic attitude.]

### **In love and friendship**

What is significant in it is being open to the love of the Lord calling to us, offering his arm in aid to one who he has called “his friend”, so that the latter can meet in love and friendship those whom he has hurt and thrust aside. At one time, during the perhaps “over-joyful days” that followed the Second Vatican Council, there was an opinion (to which I subscribed) which favoured white vestments at a funeral rather than the traditional black or the penitential purple/violet. The reason was good in its way: we were celebrating and commemorating, not so much death (actually, our “having died” rather than our “death”), as our belief in the Resurrection – so white was the appropriate liturgical colour. Something, however, was being left out here: purgatory. Although it takes place (if one can put it like that) in the glorious light of the Resurrection, which is the presence of new created life, and is only meaningful within this context – nevertheless Purgatory is quite emphatically penitential, and thus the Church’s traditional use of purple is indeed appropriate.

The reference to “penitential” makes me think of its relationship to the Catholic tradition of the Sacrament of Penance and its relevance to this context. This is the poor relation among sacraments, or so-called sacraments – nobody really knows what it is all about. Until fairly recently it was referred to, and practised regularly by Catholics, as “confession”, and took place in whispers in dark boxes at the back of the church. Terrible sanctions were imposed upon those who abused it. At its worst, I think, the priest had to demand of the penitent “Will you stop doing this?” ... “All right, I will give you penance and absolution.” Is that in the gospels? Does one ever hear of Jesus putting it that way round? Is his forgiveness conditional? The forgiveness which he gives, which is God’s (cf. e.g. Mt 9:6) *always* comes first – even Mt 6:15 is not contradicting that. There is however a corollary: “Come, follow me” or “Go; sin no more”. The forgiveness itself is totally gratuitous – God’s love.

This tradition of confession and penance derives from the situation in the early Church where backsliding, under persecution, was not uncommon. It was necessary for there to be reconciliation, and public reconciliation at that. The term “reconciliation” never totally disappeared. It has been dug up again quite recently and we get it, as a result, used in the modern terminology of the “Sacrament of Reconciliation”. Great! But has this been worked through and properly understood? I think not. In between the early Church and the present day, religion has steadily been privatised; to oversimplify a bit, perhaps, it is all about me and my little soul before God (a “nasty” dirty soul, because it is always in need of re-healing: to be human is to be a recidivist!).

As an example of this, communion in the Eucharist has for a long time been all about making *me* holy; confession (penance) has been all about making *me* pure and clean before God – as if God could only bear the company of those who had been bathed

and perfumed! (Jesus was somewhat different, but who was he? We don't know if we don't read the Gospels to find out. Cf. Mgr Myriel, who in *Les Misérables* was said to have been such a holy man and bishop because "perhaps he had read the gospels.") I don't believe all this cleaning or polishing up of the soul business; contrition is effective enough for that. The sacraments, in my understanding of them, are not simply what Jesus told us to do ("Go out and baptise ..."), nor what we might *infer* that he wanted, but a dramatic, even semi-mythological, action showing from within his Church his relationship to that Church – or in other words to the People of God. The sacrament of forgiveness, or compassion, as I would like to think of it, is the Church's public declaration that she is following the Christ himself when he says, *first of all* not last of all, "Neither do I condemn you" (Jn 8:11). "Reconciliation" is for the sake of the Church: it is a declaration of how she embodies Jesus as the Christ, just as the Eucharist is for the Church more than for each individual within it – seen as being achieved with pieces of unrecognisable "bread" turned into God.

So does a dying person need to make a "general", or "better than ever before", Confession? I don't think so. Of course she or he needs to look inward and be aware of her/his sins, the hurts committed on others, the contempt or lack of response to the love of God, etc.; and some people may need help with this. But when one comes across the idea that someone dying is lucky if they have a priest to hand to hear their confession – what corrupt nonsense! Catholicism is debasing Christianity. The pastoral need, however, for someone to be comforted (strengthened) at this critical time is another matter, as just suggested; but it may or may not be the necessary work of a priest/minister. I have come across the case of someone dying making a confession purely for the sake of comforting the priest! It is probably the latter that needs it most.

I do believe most profoundly in the sacraments; but if I do not want to "make a confession" this should not be seen as contradicting this belief. I do wish, however, that there were some way of making public my wish for reconciliation. Our bishops, however, have effectively made this out of court as part of the normal life of the Church. I think they believe it would weaken their control and power over us.<sup>5</sup>

Back to Purgatory again, where I meet and seek the forgiveness (in Christ) of those who I have harmed and wounded. I hope I don't "meet" any of you "there", for it would mean that I had at some time hurt you or failed in caring for you. I hope, however, that we shall all *meet up* purified (purged, if you like) in the glory of the light of the Resurrection – in other words in Heaven – whatever the meaning of "meeting up" might be.

Giles Hibbert, 25.02.07

- 1 Giles wrote this only a few days after the cancer diagnosis. But further medical examination showed that this diagnosis was mistaken.
- 2 This refers to the "Cambridge Lectures" given by Fr Columba Ryan when Giles was still in the Army and an engineering student at Emmanuel College. Though their later relationship was sometimes stormy, Giles always had an immense gratitude to Columba for the vision he had received from him about the Christian and Dominican life.
- 3 In fact he lived for another six years, and returned to live in a Dominican community, first in London and finally in Cambridge.
- 4 At the time, Giles was living at Chapel-en-le-Frith, Derbyshire.
- 5 Giles is probably referring here to "The Reconciliation of a group of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution". This was promulgated in 1972 but permission to use it was subsequently withdrawn by Rome.