



A Christian Death

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How long will we all live for? We know the average life expectancy is 76. We know that if a person has some type of terminal disease his or her chances of dying sooner than later are increased tremendously, but still the exact moment of our death is unforeseeable. Only God knows the exact time of us leaving this world to enter into the next. But as Christians we hope that whenever we do pass from this life it will be peaceful. In light of all this I am going to share with you my experience of my uncle's recent death, whose timing and manner was quite surprising.

This past April my uncle at the age of 83 was diagnosed with lung cancer. He had been born during the depression, fought in WWII and outlived all of his siblings (some by more than 70 years) but what took his life in the end was the side effects of smoking for 5 decades. No one was surprised by the diagnosis, but no one was looking forward to the painful passing that often results from such an infirmity. Almost immediately after his diagnosis, he began receiving constant oxygen supplement treatments. As time went on his breathing became more and more difficult, he became weaker, disorientated and perplexed why the Lord was allowing him to die such a terrible death. It was not all dismal though, during the last two months of his life he would have spells of serenity and joy at which time he often took advantage to plan his own death and the details of his funeral. But still no one knew when he would pass away, so when I received a phone call on May 24th informing me that he only had 2 days to live I was somewhat skeptical. Nevertheless I decided to travel and be with him, his daughter and his niece in this time of suffering.

Reconciliation with God

When I arrived I saw what was a once vibrant, boastful, strong man subjected to become an exhausted, disorientated, and debilitated human who could barely open his eyes. His breathing was impeded by the filling of his lungs with fluid which sounded like constant gargling of mouth wash. At this time I had no idea how long he would live for so I did not waste any time and we prepared to give him Holy Communion. We prepared incense, chanted the Paschal Troparion and the 9th ode to the Theotokos and administered the gifts to Walter (my uncle) for his last time. After this his breathing started to get worse and worse, almost sounding like the bubbling of thick molasses. The hospice nurse came in several times and commented on the quick deterioration of his condition and it would not be long before he was gone. Despite the obvious signs I still did not expect for him to pass away any time soon. As my wife so accurately said "I was in denial", but my uncle was not. He was preparing and ready to go. His wife had died five years earlier and he had enough of this world and wanted to get the fastest transfer he could to the one to come. Walter did not waste time, just minutes after receiving the flesh and blood of God he was proclaiming his desire to be reconciled with his creator by saying "Forgive me God" ... "Have mercy on me Lord". What he was asking forgiveness for we do not know. Maybe for the unwarranted guilt of his brother drowning when he was 8, or for the years he spent fighting in WWII, or maybe the death of his sister who died from complications from childbirth at the age of 35. Much of what human beings carry as sin has very little to do with their own actions, but the pain is still there and God has the power to take that pain away. In this sense forgiveness is not so much the pardon of what we have done wrong but the peace given to us when the Lord takes the burdens and sadness off our souls. This is what happened to Walter. Within minutes he started to proclaim "It is alright." We wondered what was exactly alright when his daughter ask "Is everything all right now?" and he said "Yes!" This was the red flag signaling that he was prepared to leave this world.

Forgive and you will be forgiven

I was still in denial. I have seen a lot of dead people. I have seen people dying but I have never seen a person die, and I really never imagined I ever would so this would be no exception. I did

know that my uncle had a hard life and much hurt and anguish filled his soul. In his last moments (though I did not know it was his last moments) we spoke about a person whom he held much resentment toward. I could see him get very agitated when we began to speak about this person. Not wanting to open a can of worms I approached the issue cautiously though I made it clear to Walter that if he wanted to be forgiven by God he needs to forgive those who have hurt him. And an incredible thing happened. He got it! I could see the tension leave his body and face and I saw as sign of relief which said "Oh that is how it works, it makes sense." If God was to forgive him he had to forgive those who had hurt him.

Continuing the journey

At this time the nurses came in to make Walter feel more comfortable by moving him to a better position. Me, Walter's daughter and his niece went out side of the room while the nurses aided Walter. At that time we took advantage of the opportunity to talk about what exactly was going on, but within seconds our conversation was interrupted by the nurse who said that Walter is taking his last breath. I said to myself, that can not be true I was just speaking to him, but as we re-entered the room all my doubts left as I saw Walter's breath and spirit leave his body. I saw a man vibrant, alter and fixated to the heavens with his eyes now wide open (they had been almost shut for my entire visit). Myself, Marcie (Walter's daughter) and Pauline (Walter's niece) stood there comforting him by holding his hand and stroking his hair, and witnessing Walter looking up to what only he could see. There was no hesitation or concern in his expression only a steadfastness and certainty that it was his time to go and continue what began for him some 83 years earlier. That expression and that eye piercing resoluteness lasted for what seemed for an eternity and then his soul slowly was no longer.

Life changing

Walter died on May 25th 2006 and I know that he is alive in Christ. His death affirmed for me once again that there is so much more that goes on than we ever see. His death gave me inspiration and hope of how we all should leave this world, clinging to God, being at peace with those in our life, our loved ones and our enemies, and as our spirit leaves our body we need to look to heaven knowing that the most important thing in the world is to always turn to the Lord. This experience profoundly made an impression on me, on Walter's daughter and also on his niece who said "through Walter's death I have once again found purpose in life." As Christians we all hope for this, death not to be an end but a transformational opportunity to life. May we all be strengthened from Walter's passing so to prepare for our own death when ever that may be.

I would like to thank Marchia Kilpatrick (Walter's daughter) who allowed me to be a part of this sacred time and record it so to witness to others. Also I would like to thank Pauline Clifford for allowing the experience to penetrate her own life so to have it transform her and also permitting me to be part of that process. Most of all I give gratitude to Walter who despite of the scars of this world he never stopped looking to the Lord for salvation and has encouraged my faith in the awesome power of Christ. May his memory be eternal. Amen