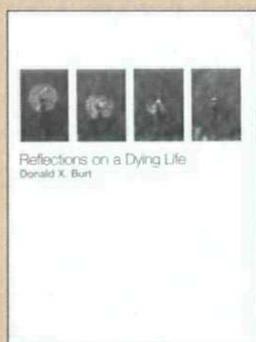


BOOK Reviews



Reflections on a Dying Life

Donald X. Burt

Liturgical Press,
Collegeville, MN, 2005,
194 pp., \$16.95

Fr. Donald X. Burt, OSA, is an Augustinian cleric, now enjoying his ninth decade of life, who is emeritus professor of philosophy at Villanova University, Philadelphia. He is, in fact, an alumnus of Villanova whose dissertation on *The State and Religious Toleration: Aspects of the Church-State Theories of Four Christian Thinkers* earned him his doctorate at the Catholic University of America in 1960. Much devoted to scholarship concerning the philosophical attainments of Augustine, the sainted bishop of Hippo in Roman Africa, Fr. Burt includes among his noteworthy publications *Augustine's World: An Introduction to His Speculative Philosophy* (1996) and *Friendship and Society: An Introduction to Augustine's Practical Philosophy* (1999). Although, as the titles of these works suggest, Fr. Burt is a learned expositor of such teachings in metaphysics and ethics as Augustine had left in writing, he is also the author of a number of monographs in the field of Augustinian spirituality, among which *Reflections on a Dying Life* is the most recent.

Reflections on a Dying Life is a memoir, the thesis of which is that, between birth and death, the human condition resembles a hospice, and that, within the confines of this allegorical hospice, human life operates in tension toward fulfillment in grace after death.

The word "hospice," which passed from French into English early in the 19th century, entered the history of European languages as the Latin *hospitium*, a term that signifies either the quality of being hospitable or the place in which travelers, pilgrims, and strangers may be lodged and entertained. By calling the world a "hospice," Fr. Burt revives the ancient symbol of *homo viator*, "man the wayfarer," about which Gabriel Marcel famously developed his theology of hope in occupied France during World War II. A hospice, there-

fore, is not a home; but, whether to or from the country in which an itinerant may properly dwell, it lies upon the way.

Between birth and death, human life is inseparable from transience. And, as transience implies loss, human life entails mortality. Thus death, as Fr. Burt understands, is part of life, the "dying life" that is sustained in the hospice of worldly careers.

It was the novelist Rosa Mulholland (1841-1921), the wife of Sir John Thomas Gilbert, himself librarian of the Royal Irish Academy, who is usually thought to have been the first to apply the word "hospice" to a place in which care and comfort should be furnished to the dying. "I will say a few words," she wrote, "of a charity originated by a woman, and carried on in truly heroic spirit by the Sisters of Charity at Harold's Cross, Dublin. It is not a hospital, for no one comes here expecting to be cured, nor is it a home for incurables, as the patients do not look forward to spending years in the place. It is simply a 'hospice,' where those are received who have very soon to die, and who know not where to lay their weary heads."¹

The unnamed woman whom Lady Gilbert described as foundress of the charity that, in Ireland, gave relief to the dying was Sr. Mary John Gaynor of the Congregation of the Religious Sisters of Charity. This community of nuns was organized in Dublin by Mary Aikenhead (1787-1858) in 1815 and came to be associated with St. Vincent's University Hospital, the institution that "Mrs. Aikenhead"—as she was ordinarily called but whose name in religion was Sr. Mary Augustine—established in 1834. Because Sr. Mary John Gaynor's labor of love for those not "expecting to be cured" was originated as Our Lady's Hospice, Harold's Cross, admitting its first patients—nine in number—December 9, 1879, it seems clear that Lady Gilbert took her use of the word "hospice" from

the Irish Sisters of Charity. And, in Chapter 6 of *Ulysses*, James Joyce memorialized their hospice as: "The *Mater Misericordiae*. Eccles street. My house down there. Big place. Ward for incurables there. Very encouraging. Our Lady's Hospice for the dying. Deadhouse handy underneath. Where old Mrs Riordan died. They look terrible the women. Her feeding cup and rubbing her mouth with the spoon. Then the screen round her bed for her to die."²

The Sisters of Charity continue their tradition of palliative care at Our Lady's Hospice in Harold's Cross on the south side of the Irish capital, not far removed from the Grand Canal. Harold's Cross (in Gaelic, *Crois Araird*), where Joyce found Stephen Dedalus attending the children's party in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is the ground upon which public executions were conducted for the city of Dublin before the 19th century. Our Lady's Hospice, as it were, was built atop Golgotha.

In the United States, and perhaps elsewhere, many hospices for the dying have been transformed into utilitarian enterprises; and, as charity makes concessions to utility, there now seems to be an appreciable risk of their becoming mercantile concerns in which death is not quite so much a certainty to be awaited as a service to be performed. So, contrary to the principles that anyone would understand to be those of an association devoted to the well-being of persons whose earthly lives are approaching their natural ends, Theresa Marie Schiavo, a disabled human being and professing Catholic who was admitted on March 3, 2000, to Hospice House Woodside, Pinellas Park, FL, but not as a patient who had "very soon to die," succumbed to the malicious irony of therapeutic homicide on March 31, 2005. A hospice, like the culture that environs it, is by no means a haven exempt from every danger.

To Fr. Burt, the cosmic hospice in which humanity develops and discovers its historical constitution is, like Plato's Cave, a mixture of light and dark, of truth and lie, of joy and sorrow, and thus of good and evil. Its inmates are deeply flawed or, as Fr. Burt likes to say, "cracked." Although he does not expound a robust theology of original sin, the impression Fr. Burt conveys of the human predicament is that of a landscape

tenanted with broken lives; and this is a view of human history altogether consistent with what Augustine portrayed in *The City of God*. Fr. Burt, in agreement with Augustine, suggests a moral anthropology according to which the human species is distinguished by a natural desire for what each member of the species is naturally lacking, that is, for the perfection of life. The "being" of human beings, in other words, is incompletely being.

As concerning the perfection of life, the question at issue is whether the natural desires of human beings to be more, or to be better, than they are already means that they can be. If not, since the evidence of history is that human nature is incompetent to perfection, it may be reasoned that those beings whose nature it is to aim at perfect life are always doomed to perish in the midst of their desires.

Fr. Burt makes no formal argument to show that happiness requires perfection; but, since confidence fails where perfection is absent, his perfectionistic understanding of happiness seems entirely plausible. Since, therefore, a possible happiness for anyone must be commensurate with a possible perfection, Fr. Burt devotes a fair portion of his text to the prospect of human immortality and to the grace of God, without which nothing at all may be perfect in its kind.

Immortality, among the tenured pundits now at leisure on the campus of any institute devoted to the arts and sciences, is most unfashionable as a topic of discussion. Thus Fr. Burt is much to be admired for such considerations of immortality as, in his text, he has been able to furnish. On acceptance of the very obstinate fact that, between birth and death, there is no perfect life and, as a result, no coming to rest in a happiness from which absolutely no good is lacking in order to be complete, his thesis is that human fulfillment is possible on the necessary condition of immortal human being. Were death never survived, the natural desire to flourish must certainly be in vain. So death, according to the moral anthropology that Fr. Burt elaborates in *Reflections on a Dying Life*, is not a sign of termination. It is, instead, the moment of passage from the hospice of this world to the mansions of eternity. And in the transit of life, from history to eternity, nothing of

In the United States, and perhaps elsewhere, many hospices for the dying have been transformed into utilitarian enterprises; and, as charity makes concessions to utility, there now seems to be an appreciable risk of their becoming mercantile concerns in which death is not quite so much a certainty to be awaited as a service to be performed.

Reflections on a Dying Life

Although faith may not be "easy," it can be doubted that faith depends so much "on the testimony of others" as it does on the troublesome grace of God. There is nothing more convenient than to rely on what others may happen to say. And there is nothing more requisitive than enigmatic fellowship with the divinity whose word is beyond all saying.

value is ever lost.

However it may be that humanity transcends death, Fr. Burt does not imagine it to surpass the distinction between good and evil. Justice, natural as well as divine, requires the division of heaven from hell. Human destiny, therefore, is such that no virtue goes unrewarded and, except by the grace of God, no vice remains unpunished. Heaven is the site and symbol of life with God, who is the cause of all perfections and thus of endless perfect living. And since, as remarked earlier, the capacities of perfection exceed the limits of human nature, human fulfillment under God comes by grace, not by merit. Divine forgiveness of imperfection, and the perfect charity that is perfectly forgiving, always trump justice. Beatitude, therefore, is never an entitlement.

Reflections on a Dying Life is a specifically Christian narrative that gives witness to faith and, especially, to *fides consolans*, a faith the substance of which is every consolation against the potency of death. The reader, none the less, could wish for an account of faith somewhat better than what Fr. Burt expresses by his writing that "faith is never easy because it depends on the testimony of others." Although faith may not be "easy," it can be doubted that faith depends so much "on the testimony of others" as it does on the troublesome grace of God. There is nothing more convenient than to rely on what others may happen to say. And there is nothing more requisitive than enigmatic fellowship with the divinity whose word is beyond all saying. So faith is not a rumor; but, in paraphrase of Søren Kierkegaard, the eulogist of Abraham, it must be lived and relived as the inward tension of outward uncertainty.

By seasoning his text with references to Augustine, Fr. Burt plainly intends his readers to examine the works and days of the bishop of Hippo. *Reflections on a Dying*

Life may thus be treated as a prologue to the writings of this greatest among Latin patristics. What Fr. Burt has published is a good introduction to the Augustinian corpus. His prose, unencumbered by the argot of professional scholarship, is comfortable to read. His arguments are free of guile. There are, however, a few mishaps of language that ought to have been repaired by the attentions of a scrupulous editor.

Viewing the world as a hospice in which life is preparation for death, Fr. Burt recalls the gift and grace of mortification, now a byword even among devout Catholics schooled in the routines of confession and of penance. Mortification, to a philosopher, is the practice of death (*hê meletê thanatou*) by which Socrates, whose name means "the master of life," explained the love of wisdom in his last discourse with friends. To a philosopher like Fr. Burt, the love of Holy Wisdom, of *Hagia Sophia*, is the impetus of faith. And he has shown that what is vital to the faith is indeed the practice of death, a "dying life" that forever lives by perishing, and lives forever more.

J. C. Marler, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Philosophy
Saint Louis University
St. Louis

NOTES

1. Rosa Mulholland, "On Philanthropic Work of Women in Ireland," in Angelina Georgina Burdett-Coutts, ed., *Woman's Mission: A Series of Congress Papers on the Philanthropic Work of Women*, New York City and London, 1893, p. 426.
2. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Viking International, New York City, 1990, p. 97.