



Memento mori

Memento mori, a Latin phrase meaning “remember you will die,” is an ancient, cross-cultural practice found in many of the great spiritual traditions, and cultures – Stoicism, Buddhism, Greek and Roman philosophies, Judaism and Christianity, to mention a few. It comes to mind as we, towards the end of February, begin the season of Lent, which, in turn, begins with Ash Wednesday and the distribution of ashes, “Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.” Sobering yet true, not a dark, depressing, macabre thought, rather one that puts the present, good or challenging, into stark perspective.

The early Christian tradition of having a human skull on one’s desk or prie-dieu, or some religious orders, requiring their members to sleep in the coffin in which they will be buried are some extreme examples of memento mori. I remember reading the interesting thought, each year, “We live the day which will become our death date.”

I decided, as part of my “to-do” list for the New Year, to bring my end-of-life documents up to date, which included planning my requiem. I’m not sure what prompted this, perhaps age, or lately, accompanying a number of people to the Jordan. So, as my Lenten discipline this year, I have decided to prepare and reflect on my requiem as a form of memento mori.

I’m aware Lent has yet to begin, however these are a few thoughts that have already collaged in me. I would like to be buried, not cremated. I know it’s not ecologically sound, however I feel there is something right about returning my body to the earth that has, so faithfully, nourished it. I would like a Jewish coffin. The Jews have the sensible tradition of burial in a simple wooden coffin containing no iron. We buried both my parents in pinewood coffins with rope handles. There was something so simple and organic about the pine coffin on the floor of the church.

I’m not too concerned about the music, however, even though cliché, “In the morning of my life I shall look to the sunrise,” has always been a favorite. The readings have been coalesc-

ing over the years. Definitely Psalm 23 for the Responsorial, hackney, I know, but I have lived the Psalm ten thousand times on the Caminos, it’s in my bones. The first reading will be the same one we used for my mother’s requiem, she died on 21 December when the reading is from the Song of Songs 2:10-14, “Come then my love, my lovely one come.” The Gospel still requires some thought, some possibilities are:

John 14:1-7 – “There are many rooms in my Father’s house, I go to prepare a place for you... I am the way.”

Luke 15:11-32 – “The Father was so deeply moved with compassion that he ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him.”

Luke 24:13-35 – “Stay with us Lord it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.”

I have no preference as to the presider or a wake, however I’m tempted to repeat the request my father had for his internment. After the final commendation prayers and the coffin had been lowered, he asked that we hand out little glasses, open a good bottle of whiskey and drink a toast to life before throwing the glasses into the grave, it feels right.

So even though Ash Wednesday occurs towards the end of the month, I realize I actually began memento mori years ago, when I downloaded the app, “WeCroak,” based on a Bhutan saying, “Contemplating death five times a day brings happiness.” A few times, each day, my mobile pings with the message, “Remember you’re going to die.” You have no idea how helpful it is, stuck in traffic or a long queue at the pharmacy, on hold for an hour, angry or upset, and along comes the message immediately, bringing perspective, memento mori, or as Redemptorist Br. Andrew always used to say, “What is this to eternity?”

Blessed Lent and happy remembering.

Michael

Creative and logistical support for Michael, his *Buen Camino* newsletter and HermitFish.com website are provided by Enigma | LA, enigmala.com

Michael News

Having survived the nearly three weeks of “atmospheric river” storms, during which Michael remained cloistered in his hermitage in the Santa Cruz Mountains, he shared how wonderful it was to finally have sun, and, already, early signs of Spring.

Michael thanks those who have sent encouragement and support over the past weeks and assures you all of a daily candle burning, in his chapel, for your intentions.

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