



# THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER

6399 Drexel Road, Philadelphia, PA 19151 Tel. 215-877-2660 Fax. 215-877-2688 [www.ncbcenter.org](http://www.ncbcenter.org)

## Catholic Spiritual Support at the End of Life

Each and every person's moment of death is of the highest significance. The Church has always focused with the greatest zeal on bringing the sacraments and every kind of spiritual support possible to the dying. That effort was the background for the *Ars Moriendi*, or [The Art of Dying](#), composed in the late Middle Ages, probably by a Dominican friar. It was one of the most popular and influential texts in Christendom for centuries. The fact that very few people today, except for scholars, have even heard of it speaks volumes about the neglect that spiritual preparation for death has fallen into in our times. There is a modern temptation to over-medicalize dying with a corresponding disregard for the life of the soul in contemporary health care. This is why *The Art of Dying* is such an important work.

One of the very few benefits of going through a terrible pandemic as we are today is the enhanced sense of our own mortality and vulnerability to an early death. This can lead to conversion and a stronger spiritual life. *Memento mori*, "or remember that you will die," is an ancient philosophical meditation going back to the Greeks but also to Far Eastern philosophies and religions. It is not surprising that so many cultures have focused on this theme. The fact that all living beings on earth die is a stark reality. *Memento mori* was taken up by the Early Church and encouraged throughout the ages as a useful meditation. It is proposed not from a morbid fascination with death, but rather as a way to go through this life with a fundamental orientation towards eternal life.

While few contemporaries are aware of the *Ars Moriendi* or the *Memento mori* meditation, there is a Latin phrase almost everyone knows: *Carpe Diem*, or seize the day. The attitude when faced with death that one should "eat, drink, and be merry" in the limited time we have is the opposite of the traditional Christian view. We live in a hedonistic age, one that is tempted to value pleasure as the highest good. The glaring problem with this unbridled pursuit is the looming fact of death awaiting all of us. It seems to me that the main tactic of many modern people is to simply live in denial of death, to banish it from their thoughts. Some have an obsession with looking younger and healthy even as they inevitably grow older. Once again, however, crises like this pandemic serve to burst the fragile bubble of denial.

Some become consumed with fear of death or even despair when faced with the possibility of unpredictable death from disease. Those for whom the message of Christ has transformed their lives should be filled with hope and a desire to prepare for the next and more important life after death. It remains a fact, however, that death is a moment of physical separation from our loved ones that causes fear for many believers and atheists alike. Death, we are told in scripture, was not part of God's original plan for humanity, which is why it involves the terribly unnatural separation of the soul from the body.

*Defending the dignity of the human person in health care and the life sciences since 1972*



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The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) has, quite providentially I believe, just brought out a new edition of *The Art of Dying* in the midst of this pandemic. It combines ancient Catholic wisdom with modern prayers such as the divine mercy chaplet. The NCBC also managed, after much painstaking work, to include very detailed reproductions of the beautiful original medieval woodblock prints. We are grateful to Brother Columba Thomas, OP, MD, for his translation and annotation of this important work of Catholic spirituality. Mother Agnes Mary Donovan, SV, who wrote the foreword, points out how the late John Cardinal O'Connor urged the Sisters of Life, which he founded, to strive for the conversion of souls and hearts. Under their charism of defending life, he understood that “ultimately the salvation of the soul is infinitely more important than the salvation of the body.”

*The Art of Dying* is an invaluable reminder of the importance of spiritual preparation for death. No intelligent person would fail to prepare for an exam in school, yet many Catholics neglect to prepare for death and their appearance before the throne of God. Or again, how much effort do we spend preparing for a wedding when death is a much more important event? I love the quotation from St. Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) at the start of *The Art of Dying*. “Whoever bears in mind his end rouses himself to doing good works.” This is timeless wisdom as is the fact, true in every age but particularly in ours, that people rarely dispose themselves for death

in a timely manner, thinking they will survive a while longer and not acknowledging that they could die suddenly. The [\*Ars Moriendi\*](#) was written after the Black Death pandemic. Its insights can help all of us as we pass through a significant but much less severe trial.