

Life
EVERLASTING

THE
MYSTERY
AND
THE
PROMISE

J. Brian Bransfield

Life
EVERLASTING

The Mystery and the Promise

J. Brian Bransfield

With a Foreword by
Seán Cardinal O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap.


Pauline
BOOKS & MEDIA
Boston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bransfield, J. Brian.

Life everlasting : the mystery and the promise / J. Brian Bransfield.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-8198-4580-1 (pbk.) -- ISBN 0-8198-4580-9 (pbk.)

1. Eschatology. 2. Death--Religious aspects--Catholic Church. 3. Future life--Catholic Church. I. Title.

BT821.3.B73 2015

236'.2--dc23

2015001223

Unless otherwise noted the Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition*, copyright © 1989, 1993, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All other Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, Revised Edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Excerpts from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the United States of America, copyright © 1994, 1997 United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with permission.

Cover design by Rosana Usselmann

Cover photo istockphoto.com/© theevening

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

“P” and PAULINE are registered trademarks of the Daughters of St. Paul.

Copyright © 2015, J. Brian Bransfield

Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Pauls Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in the U.S.A.

www.pauline.org

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

19 18 17 16 15



For

Reverend Monsignor Ronny E. Jenkins, S.T.L., J.C.D.





*“When they heard
of the resurrection of the dead,
some scoffed, but others said,
‘We should like to hear you on this some other time.’”*

— ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 17:32





Contents

Foreword	xv
Acknowledgments	xvii
Introduction	1
CHAPTER ONE	
Questions and Clues about Death	5
CHAPTER TWO	
The Painful “No More”	17
<i>The pain behind the questions</i>	17
<i>Feeling the pain death leaves behind</i>	19
<i>Touching the pain: “no more”</i>	21
CHAPTER THREE	
From “No More” to “More Than”	25
<i>Seeing and touching</i>	25
<i>Common objections</i>	28
<i>The temptation to drop the thread and turn back</i>	29
<i>Death and atheism</i>	30

CHAPTER FOUR

Holding On	33
<i>The Family: God's preference for the obvious</i>	35

CHAPTER FIVE

The First Clue: Existence	39
<i>Gardens: perennial truths</i>	40
Rocks	41
Tomatoes	42
Rex	43
<i>The momentum in existence</i>	44
<i>Created in the image and likeness of God</i>	45
<i>The human soul</i>	47

CHAPTER SIX

The Second Clue: At Reason's Edge	51
<i>From the garden to the toy store</i>	52
<i>Our yearning as a clue</i>	53
<i>The contingent yearning for the Infinite</i>	56
<i>The deep places of Being</i>	58
<i>Faith and reason</i>	61
<i>The beginning of faith</i>	63

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Third Clue: Sin and Death	65
<i>Death: Is God the culprit?</i>	65
<i>Death fashioned by human hands</i>	67
<i>Original Sin: the fault lines</i>	69

<i>The sin of the fallen angels</i>	73
<i>The Protoevangelium</i>	77
<i>The connection between sin and death</i>	78
<i>Death's deeper secret</i>	81

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jesus and Death: God's Own Tears	87
<i>Magic, mystery, and miracles</i>	87
Jairus' daughter	90
A widowed mother burying her only son	93
Lazarus	95
<i>A sign and pledge</i>	102

CHAPTER NINE

The Cross of Jesus: Death Overcome from Within	105
<i>Our Lord's cry from the cross</i>	112
<i>The wound in Our Lord's side</i>	116
<i>Christ's descent among the dead</i>	119
<i>Reverence for the body of the deceased</i>	123

CHAPTER TEN

Jesus and the Resurrection: God's Own Joy	125
<i>The empty tomb</i>	127
<i>The appearances of the risen Lord</i>	128
<i>The road to Emmaus</i>	131
<i>The wounds</i>	134
<i>The resurrection</i>	137
<i>Our resurrection</i>	137
<i>The ascension</i>	141

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Last Things	145
<i>The particular judgment</i>	146
<i>Hell</i>	151
<i>Purgatory</i>	155
<i>Heaven</i>	160
<i>The general judgment and the resurrection of the body</i>	163
Conclusion	171
Selected Bibliography	177



Foreword

One of my favorite biblical images of Jesus is that of the Good Shepherd. He comes to gather the scattered and to seek out the lost sheep with great care, compassion, and mercy. The shepherd's staff that Jesus uses to gather the scattered is the cross. It is the power of the cross that gathers us into one. Yet this gathering requires the shepherd to lay down his life in Jerusalem.

Jesus' last stop in his journey toward his death and resurrection was Bethany, a small village that was home to the siblings Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. It was an oasis of friendship, hospitality, and peace for Jesus. It was where he went when he wanted to be surrounded by the love of his friends. It is no surprise that Jesus made this his last stop before proceeding to his suffering and death in Jerusalem. Bethany prepared Jesus for Jerusalem.

We all need "Bethanys" in our lives—especially when we face difficult decisions, trials, oppositions, suffering, and death. In the prayerful atmosphere of Bethany we can deepen our sense of vocation and our friendship with the Lord, who calls us to eternal life

with him. If we have not visited Bethany, we will never survive Jerusalem. I am so grateful to Reverend Monsignor J. Brian Bransfield for the gift of this book, *Life Everlasting: The Mystery and the Promise*. It is a Bethany for us in that it helps us to grapple with the real questions of death and pain in the light of the Lord's promise of hope and of eternal life.

In the early chapters of the book, Monsignor Bransfield takes us through his personal experiences as a boy attending his first wake, and the upheaval of his life when his mother died suddenly. He was only twelve years old at the time. Yet these experiences of death allowed him, at a young age, to ask the big questions of life. They have allowed him to reflect deeply in order to share the wisdom that is contained within this profoundly moving volume.

My hope is that this book will be like a visit to Bethany for us, allowing us to grow in our awareness of Christ's presence in our lives—especially during times of suffering and pain—so that when we inevitably encounter them, we will rest firmly in the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Psalm 126 reminds us that God transforms our tears into laughter and our sorrow into joy. I pray that through this book, we may visit Bethany, surrounded by Christ's friendship and transformed by his healing love.

✠ SEÁN CARDINAL O'MALLEY, O.F.M. CAP.
Archbishop of Boston



Acknowledgments

The opening chapter of this book begins with the events on an afternoon in August 1977, in a small room, in a house on Lyceum Avenue in Philadelphia. The concluding chapter ends in that same small room, sixteen years later, in October 1993. The actual events described are meant to serve as both the launching pad and the landing gear, to help the reader explore the teaching of the Church on the mystery of death, eternal life, and the four last things.

Though the events of those two days are etched in my memory, these chapters would likely never have been written without a request I received from my editor at Pauline Books & Media in Boston, Massachusetts, on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, December 12, 2012. Sister kindly requested that I consider writing a book on the mystery of death, eternal life, and the four last things. Before that day I had never thought of doing so. After writing this book, I cannot imagine *not* having done so.

I am, therefore, deeply grateful to the team at Pauline Books & Media for their considerable expertise in all the details of

publication that have brought this work to completion. In particular, I am thankful to Sr. Sean Mayer, FSP; Sr. Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, FSP; Sr. Donna Giaimo, FSP; Mrs. Cathy Knipper; Ms. Vanessa Reese; Ms. Kaelin Corina; and Mr. Brad McCracken.

Finally, I am most grateful to the Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M., Cap., the Archbishop of my home archdiocese of Philadelphia, for his encouragement and support; and to Cardinal Seán O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap., for the thoughtful and moving foreword of this work.



Introduction

*“Jesus says Yes to his Father’s creation
and goes in search of all beings lost in the world maze,
in order to bring them home.”¹*

—HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

At every death one can find the thread or clue for the journey to discover its meaning. That journey takes us along the way of the teaching of the Church on the mystery of eternal life and the four last things. In this book we will journey together, examining the mysteries of salvation as they relate to human death and eternal life with God. As we do, we take as our principal method what Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle, the sixteenth-century French mystic, referred to

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama Theological Dramatic Theory IV: The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 444, cf. 78.

as “the science of salvation.”² Usually we associate science with the study of biology, chemistry, or physics. But science, in its most basic meaning, refers to an ordered and logical body of knowledge. Science is the study of a series of connections. Catholic theology is a science, the first of the sciences.³ Catholic theology presents the highest of realities: divine revelation by which God reveals to us knowledge of the mysteries of God’s own life. This is why Saint Paul encourages us, “[God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:9–10). Divine revelation assists our own natural reason as we find our way.

Many fine books have identified the steps of the grieving process, and those works are important and helpful. This book does not outline precise steps, but it is also designed to help those who mourn the loss of a friend or loved one. The experience of loss and reflection on eternal life are not two separate topics—they lead into each other. When we meet one, we meet the other. In considering the mystery of eternal life made known through the words and deeds of Jesus we must first consider human death. Through examples of my own experience that served as the basis of crucial clues hiding right in the open, we will follow the thread through one of the oldest mysteries that the human race has faced: the mystery of death and eternal life. Remember, mystery cannot be rushed. Gentleness is the handle by which we open the door of mystery. Therefore, this work devotes time to highlight connections hidden beneath the sacred

2. Pierre de Bérulle, *Discourse on the State and the Grandeurs of Jesus* as in *Bérulle and the French School Selected Writings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1989), 116.

3. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q 1, a 5; cf. IIa IIae, q 1, a 5.

words that we have listened to thousands of times at Mass, found in prayers, or have read in the Bible. These words convey the hidden plan of God. Because we frequently hear these words, ideas, and concepts, we may pass over them rather quickly. Here we will slowly pass a magnifying glass over the events that surround death, daily life, reason, and the great truths of faith. We want to dust for prints, follow the thread, examine the clues and, ultimately, like our Lady, treasure these truths in our heart (see Lk 2:19). This is the task of the New Evangelization: to see what is already familiar to us on one level and understand it in a new, exciting, and life-giving way. We can have access to the depths of the mystery through grace, which builds upon effective strategies of Catholic education, meditation, and preaching.

When our loved ones die, we look at the world differently. We look at our faith differently. This book opens up the faith so that it can be seen through tear-filled eyes. Let's not hesitate to step closer to the great mystery of the wonderful works of God.



Questions and Clues about Death

The long line of people stretched out the front door of the large house, down the steps, and then around the street corner. The people in that long line looked as if they were standing on a slow-moving conveyor belt no one wanted to be on but that, nonetheless, mercilessly inched forward. Many of them had rushed around all day, busy with errands, deadlines, and routine appointments, yet now they were in no hurry to climb the steps of the Fitzpatrick Funeral Home. But, once inside, *they were sure in a hurry to get out.*

I had just turned ten years old and had never been to a “wake” before. There I stood, wearing a suit and tie in the heat of that August afternoon, as my family waited our turn to walk in and pay our respects and condolences to the grieving family. A classmate’s father had died after a long battle with cancer. As the line inched forward and I stepped onto the porch, I was aware of an odd feeling in my stomach—not a feeling of being sick, but as if my stomach was trying to fly away. Despite that feeling, I was rather quiet, like everyone else. But during the car ride from our house to the funeral home I had been anything but quiet. I pelted my parents with

questions: “What’s a wake?” “Is he going to be in a bed?” “Are they going to try to wake him up?”

“No,” my mother had replied, “that won’t happen.”

“If he isn’t going to wake up,” I responded, “then why call it a wake?” I then tried to compute the words “funeral home.” “What’s a funeral home?” “Why does a funeral have a home?” “Does a family live there?” Based on what I had heard about “funeral homes,” I thought the house would have looked a bit spookier: shutters hanging off their hinges; creaky, cracked floor boards on a dusty porch; and a broken window or two at least. But the house I now stood in front of didn’t appear haunted or ghostly. It was the opposite—it seemed *sterile*. No toys littered the manicured lawn. The expansive porch had no furniture and no television blared from the next room. Everything was too clean: overly-polished and seemingly untouched, as if no one lived there. For a funeral home, sterile and bland seemed *worse* than spooky and haunted. Sterile was feelingless, barren, and . . . *lifeless*.

I had no clue of what to expect as we stood before the large front doors of this muted and antiseptic house. During our car ride my parents had told me that a “wake” was not for the deceased, but for the people who attended. It was their opportunity to see the person for the last time and to express sympathies to his family. “*See the person?*” I asked. “But they’re dead. Why are they in a house?” I thought dead people were only in cemeteries. My mother explained that this was before the body was taken to the cemetery. The person’s body would be here and it would also be at the funeral. It was an opportunity to say a final goodbye. I could not get my mind around the body being there. Saying “goodbye” sounded strange to me as well, since a dead person cannot hear. I said, “Why say goodbye now?” “Why didn’t people say goodbye while he was alive?” My mom told me, again, that it was more for the family. The weird feeling in my stomach increased as we inched closer to the house. My

questions, though many, did not simply come from my curiosity. I was dimly aware that my questions arose more from a desire to delay the trip than from pure inquisitiveness.

My questions vanished as we passed through the large front doors of the imposing house. I braced myself and looked. I felt relieved when I realized we had simply stepped into a hallway. The body was not in sight. I could see that the line turned around a corner of the hallway. It wasn't so bad. My apprehension lessened a bit. I still felt some suspense, wondering what I would see. My father pointed out to me the collection of holy cards on the side table, handed me one, and told me to put it in my pocket. He showed me how to sign the guest book that rested on a shiny podium. Feeling important as I signed my name, I also tried to see my reflection in the polished podium.

Then it was our turn; we stepped forward and turned the corner. And I *looked*. As I did, that slow conveyor belt I had been on ground to a halt. My legs stopped inching forward. My stomach went solid. I forgot to swallow. My breath disappeared and hid in my lungs. I was no more than three-feet away from a highly-polished mahogany coffin with white-satin pillow lining all around and the lid propped wide open. The coffin seemed densely massive to me. My friend's father was lying inside wearing a blue pinstripe suit. Though his eyes were closed, he was wearing eyeglasses. At first he seemed to be sleeping, but I noticed something else, something "caky," unusual, and rigid about his skin. His lips seemed unnatural and waxy, like they were made of thin, pink plastic. His clay-colored hands were folded stiffly over his waist with a rosary intertwined in his taut fingers. Worst of all he didn't *move*. The man in the coffin had no breath; *his* chest didn't rise and fall. As I looked down from his chest, I saw he wasn't actually holding the rosary beads. They were instead loosely draped over the fingers. The fingers didn't move at all, not even slightly.

No words could have prepared me for that scene. All I could do was stare as my mouth gaped open. As I stood there my next thought was: “Why are there pillows lining the coffin?” My mom had told me earlier that a dead person cannot feel anything. Why were cushions there if he couldn’t feel anything?

Then I saw a medium-sized wooden crucifix propped up in the corner of the coffin, resting against the open lid. I had only seen crucifixes in three places. First, I had seen the crucifix hanging on a nail in the wall—at church, in people’s homes, or on the wall of my classroom at school. Second, I had also seen people wearing the crucifix around their necks as jewelry. Third, I had a small crucifix on the nightstand by my bed. Like most ten-years-olds, I had a very concrete thinking style. I was surprised to see the crucifix in the coffin. Of all the unknown things I feared seeing in the funeral home, I had not expected to see a crucifix. Its *unexpectedness* made it *stand out* all the more to me. The crucifix not only caught my attention, but it also formed a sort of nucleus to all that was going on. I recall asking later that afternoon: “Why was a crucifix propped up in the corner of the coffin?” My mother had explained that when they closed the coffin they would take out the crucifix and affix it to the top of the coffin.

I can still see that image of the wooden crucifix strongly contrasted against the white pillow and satin background. In fact, over the years, when I have gone to a funeral home in the course of my priestly ministry, the image of the crucifix in the corner is the first image that comes to my mind’s eye. It is etched in my memory. It was the unexpected center of all else. I can still sense the abiding lesson that only hope can teach: the sign of the ultimate gift and victory of Christ was present where I had not expected to see it. I thought God was only at work if he acted in a big way—if the dead man came back to life. But, despite my expectation, God was somehow already unpredictably at work even here in this difficult, unexplored place from which I wanted to escape.

Finally, I felt my father's large hand on my small back moving me gently forward. I shuffled along the side of the open coffin and gazed in. I still remember the dark suit contrasted against the white pillow lining, and his long legs stretched to the opposite end of the coffin. The image of his legs would come back in numerous nightmares later that night. Then I saw my mother reach and touch the dead man's hand as she said a prayer. *I was still within reach.* I looked up and my mother nodded. *I wanted to and I didn't want to at the same time.* I reached out my small hand and touched the dead man's hand. It felt cold, coarse, and hard. I yanked my hand back quickly. I was shocked at how dense and rubbery the skin felt. It was as if my touch came directly back to me. Years later I would read Nicholas Wolterstorff's memoir on the death of his son. Wolterstorff describes his first reaction on touching the lifeless body of his son: "Death, I knew, was cold. And death was still. But nobody had mentioned that all the softness went out."¹ I was not expecting skin to feel that way.

After we greeted the family, we stepped back on the invisible conveyor belt and moved quickly out the rear door of the funeral home. I was glad to be outside in the warm sunshine again. The breath ran out of my lungs. My legs moved quickly. So did my questions . . . especially about that touch.

That summer afternoon was not to be my final visit to a funeral home. In fact, in the space of the next twenty-seven months, between the ages of ten to twelve, I would return no less than four separate times. The next time was after the death of my grandfather, then of the pastor of our parish, then for the tragic death of a ten-year-old friend, and, finally and worst of all, for my mother. . . .

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Michigan: Eerdmans Press, 1987), 8.

For the average seventh grader, lunch is not a meal but a race. The goal is simple: to be the “first one done.” In 1979, as an average seventh grader, I was always among the semi-finalists for being the “first one done.”

The logic was simple. Morning classes at Immaculate Heart of Mary Elementary School ended precisely at 11:45 AM Every school day, from 11:30 to 11:45 AM, I watched the large clock on our classroom wall like a race-car driver revving his engine as he monitors the countdown. This was before the days of in-school lunches. Since our school had no cafeteria, we each brought our lunches in a small brown paper bag. We ate at our desks, the same desks we sat in for math, English, and spelling class. At 11:45 we stowed away our books and each row of students, when called, went to the back of the room to retrieve his or her lunch bag. We said grace before meals together . . . and then the race was on.

Why the race? After each student had finished eating, he or she was allowed to go to the large schoolyard. That meant uninterrupted fun—the longer, the better. Who had time to eat when we could flip baseball cards, shoot marbles, and pal around with friends?

Monday, November 19, 1979, was a school day like any other. After my row was called, I grabbed my brown paper lunch bag and began munching the ham sandwich and potato chips. On the outside of the lunch bag I momentarily noticed my name, written in black magic marker in my mother’s unmistakably neat handwriting. When she prepared lunches a few days in advance she always wrote my name on the outside of the bag. I thought I’d never be able to write like her, in such a precise and predictable way. Her beautiful script, which also graced my test papers and homework, was the same even on the countless grocery lists I held for her as we shopped. Little did I know, as I looked at that paper bag, that this would be the last time my mother would ever write my name.

Every schoolyard has its games and its rules. Sometimes the games, set by the students, and the rules, set by the teachers, collide. By far, the most popular game in November 1979 in our schoolyard was jailbreak. The boys would split into two groups. One group, the “robbers,” would run, while the other group, the “police” tried to catch them and put them in jail. Someone had to guard the jail, though, because if even one as-yet-uncaught robber touched the jail and yelled “Free,” then all the robbers went free. Of course, the running involved in jailbreak was against the rules. The game required an extra level of skill, for while the robbers tried to evade the police, both police and robbers tried to avoid the omnipresent lunch mothers. But with 800 children milling around, the schoolyard became a large maze with an ever-shifting network of twists and turns amid the crowd: a group of girls talking; another group jumping rope, fourth graders flipping cards nearby, and games of catch popping up here and there. In a game of jailbreak, runners could lose themselves in many places.

And so, I was on the run. As I scooted close to the school doors near the convent, my teacher called me over. My stomach dropped. I had been caught for running. This would mean my first detention. To my knowledge no Bransfield had ever had a detention. What would Mom and Dad say? But suddenly I wondered why my *teacher*, Mrs. Carroll, was in the schoolyard. Recess had just begun. Lunch mothers were supposed to roam the schoolyard, not teachers. And why was Mrs. Carroll calling me *into* the building, not to the infamous “line” where offenders had to stand until lunch ended? Obediently I climbed the school stairs. Mrs. Carroll led me into the convent, where my aunt, a Sister of St. Joseph, was waiting for me. I thought: *All this for running in the schoolyard?* It seemed a lot of trouble for a first-time offender.

Then my aunt led me into the convent and told me in simple terms that my mother, who had been in the hospital for tests but

was due home shortly, had taken a turn for the worse. I still remember my aunt's exact words: "She's not too hot." My aunt was very close to me and knew me well. She could be informal. I think, given the news she had to convey, she had to be informal. No one wants to tell a twelve-year-old that his mother is dying.

Because my mother had been having severe chest pains, the doctor had admitted her to the hospital for further tests. With my father, brother, and sisters, I went every night to visit her in the hospital. Each visit, my ears caught only the reference to when my mother would be home: "a few days." After we went home each night we would speak with her on the phone.

She had been moved to a step-down unit and was ready to be discharged: ready to come home, to make ham sandwiches, to continue writing my name on the brown lunch bags, to write the shopping list. She was ready to leave the hospital, to come home and be my mom again.

But as I was to learn later, something happened in the middle of the night. My mother suffered a massive heart attack. Everything changed. The hospital had immediately called my father and told him. They weren't sure how severe it was, so my brother and I went to school not knowing things had taken a turn. Then, mid-morning the doctor told my father: "You had better bring the whole family in. It doesn't look like she'll make it."

So now I was standing in the convent with my aunt. "Well, your Mom . . . she's not too hot. She's not doing well."

My body knew what those words meant before my mind did. I still cringe when I think of them. My first thought was: *That's impossible*. I had just seen her the night before when the whole family had visited her. She was fine. She was coming home.

My father came to the convent to pick me up. As we walked through the now empty schoolyard, my thoughts came together like a mathematical equation. We had just been with my mom in the

hospital last night. Now my brother and I were with Dad, in the middle of a workday. *We had just visited my mom in the hospital last night.* We can go again tonight. *Unless . . .* Too many pieces were falling into place for my young mind, and they were all pointing in the same direction.

When we arrived at the hospital, I walked into the intensive care unit and saw Mom through the large glass window, all hooked up, tubes everywhere, eyes rolled back. Yet she knew. *She knew I was there.* I heard her groan aloud when I walked into the room, as her eyes rolled back further.

Mom died at 3:00 PM. Only three hours earlier I had been playing a game in a schoolyard. Only three hours earlier my single greatest “worry” was getting caught breaking the rule against running in the schoolyard. Now, I had come face-to-face with one of the harshest and most unforgiving rules of life: death.² I was colliding with the hard lesson that life has rules, and one of these is death. On most school days at 3:00 PM, I’d burst through the front door and smell my mother’s meatballs already simmering as she prepared dinner. On this weekday at 3:00 PM, I was standing in an intensive care unit as the world began to disappear. I suddenly felt stranded and confused, deep in a narrow, tangled, and empty maze of death that had no way out, so I felt lost and adrift. I wanted someone to burst in and yell, “Free!” and release me from this terrible sentence. At twelve years old, I thought my mom would live forever. The daily routine of life that made sense to me had been swept away, never to return. Although

2. Donna Tartt summarizes with incisive clarity the significance of the impact of the death of a parent on a young child. See her, *The Goldfinch* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), 7; see also Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2013), 140.

many generous and kind people helped me, I still didn't know where to turn. Most of all, I wanted God to fix things. I wanted him to make it all go away—as if my mom had never died—or somehow reverse all the events of this terrible day. I wanted God to do something big.

But, as the great saints remind us, God often chooses to work in small ways—not *despite* his greatness, but precisely *because of it*. In our pride we take notice of the big things, and we want more of them. But our souls notice the small things and *love* them. Sometimes we can get so wrapped up in ourselves, in our pride, that we demand the big things. When our loved ones die, we look at the world differently. We look at our faith differently. This book opens up the faith so that it can be seen through tear-filled eyes. Let's not hesitate to step closer to the great mystery of the wonderful works of God. Saint Gregory the Great says that the soul is very important, and to nourish it we must seek out the small things that God places in our path to lead us to himself. In fact, Saint Gregory explains that there is a small string or thread *in the human soul*. When we find that thread in our soul, we are invited to follow it. Small things are often fragile. Saint Gregory emphasizes that we must be careful lest we overstrain this thread and it snaps.³

Threads are small, but we tend to notice them when they are lying on the floor or hanging from our clothes. Threads have a long history. In Olde English and Middle English the word for “thread” is “clew.” A “clew” is a large spool or ball of strong thread, the end of which one ties to a firm fixture so as to venture forward into strange, unfamiliar places. The thread is a “clew” that points out and guides us as we find our way safely through dark and unknown places. In fact, we derive our contemporary word “clue” from the Olde English

3. See Saint Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1950), Part III, Ch., 39, page 231.

“clew.” A clue is a sturdy landmark that leads us through a puzzling investigation so that we find the truth.

In 1979 I went from being an average, carefree seventh grader to a boy stuck in the narrow, confined, and lonely maze of loss and confusion. There I came upon a thread. In this book I hope to help the reader to recognize and find the thread of eternal life even amid the pain of death, to point out the clues of eternal life in the midst of death’s shifting maze. Hans Urs von Balthasar, the eminent Swiss theologian, uses the image of the maze to describe our painful earthly plight. He said that the Lord Jesus goes *into* the maze in search of us in order to bring us home. Jesus is the living Thread, *he* is the One who breaks the bars of the prison of death and frees us. He, the *living* Witness at the heart of his Church, is the One who writes our name in the book of *life*. He is at the center of these pages.