

ADVENT



MEMENTO MORI
A Companion on the Last Things

Sr. Theresa Aletheia Noble, FSP

Memento Mori

AN ADVENT COMPANION
ON THE LAST THINGS

By Sr. Theresa Aletheia Noble, FSP



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*For Mary Ellen Shea Clifford, my beloved aunt
without whom this book would not exist.
Rest in peace Aunt ME.*

*In gratitude to all those whose generosity and support
has made this book possible, especially:*

*Jeffrey Matthews
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Originally this Advent companion began with a short story that centered around an actual event that happened to me and a group of sisters. The story described an incident in which a young man, upon seeing a group of religious sisters out in public, tried to pose for a picture in front of us shirtless and with a fan of money in his hands. When confronted for his inappropriate behavior, his excuse was, “Gotta get the likes man, gotta get the likes.” His actions were offensive, but the incident stuck with me because it seemed a perfect analogy of the battle of grace and sin in the soul. In the story, the young man’s actions represented the personification of concupiscence.

Though the story could not appear in this book, I would like to share why I thought it important. The Last Things are topics that defy safe, comfortable presentations of the faith and invite a more poetic contemplation of themes beyond our full comprehension. For this reason, unlike my past books on *memento mori*, here I have avoided more didactic, catechetical phrasing, in order to encourage readers to contemplation. So, I originally hoped to begin with a short story because fiction encourages us to enter a poetic world and leave behind safe, black-and-white lines and facile understanding. I continue to believe this book will facilitate

Vanitas Still Life, Herman Henstenburgh
(ca. 1700s).

that process in many ways—in great part because of the incredible art that so many artists have generously contributed. My hope is that the writing, art, and prayer prompts will exercise the muscles of your hearts and help you to enter into contemplating the Last Things in ways that resist anodyne presentations. God is found in this journey of mystery and trust, and I have faith that he will bring you there as you travel with this Advent companion.



For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world. Yet the world and its enticement are passing away. But whoever does the will of God remains forever.

— 1 John 2:16-17

Christianity will always be seen by this world as a living paradox, a madness for some, a scandal for others. For us it is a divine truth and reality . . . to sacrifice one's life in order to save it; to lose everything to gain everything. And the peak of the paradox is that poverty becomes wealth; abasement, exaltation; virginity, motherhood; slavery, freedom; sacrifice, beatitude . . . death, life.

— Blessed James Alberione

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MEMENTO MORI, THE LAST THINGS, AND ADVENT

Memento mori or “remember your death” is a phrase long associated with the practice of remembering the unpredictable and inevitable end of one’s life. Popular in medieval times, this tradition stretches back to the very beginning of salvation history for Christians. After the first sin, God reminds Adam and Eve of their mortality: “You are dust, / and to dust you shall return” (Gn 3:19). God’s words continue to echo throughout Scripture, reminding readers of life’s brevity while exhorting them to remember their death. The Book of Sirach urges, “In whatever you do, remember your last days, / and you will never sin” (7:36). The psalmist prays, “Teach us to count our days aright, / that we may gain wisdom of heart” (Ps 90:12). In the New Testament, Jesus exhorts his disciples to pick up their crosses daily and to remember their death as they follow him to the Place of the Skull: “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23).

The phrase *memento mori* has been used for millennia in the Christian tradition in reference to reminders of death and the practice of meditation on death. In contemporary pop culture, it still appears, including in YouTube videos, TV shows, and podcasts. It’s important to bear in mind, however, that the phrase can be used in many different, and, at times, conflicting ways. In fact, in contemporary usage *memento mori* sometimes means precisely the opposite of what it means in the Christian

tradition. *Memento mori* without the Christian sense can be equated with the unfortunate modern acronym YOLO or “you only live once”: the idea that we should fit in as much pleasure, money earning, and success as possible before we die. Of course, if one does not believe in God and the afterlife, it might make sense to live according to *memento mori* in this hedonistic sense. If as Christians, however, we truly believe what we profess, we should avoid approaching life according to such a philosophy.

For Christians, death is illuminated by the hope that comes to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, many of us nevertheless approach life with mindsets that do not reflect a Christian understanding of death, and thus life. I know this from experience. A former atheist, I entered the convent after a radical conversion experience that changed the course of my life completely. Even after converting, entering the convent, studying theology and philosophy for years, praying regularly, and reading extensively about the faith, I still thought in many ways like an atheist. When I was feeling particularly honest with myself, I had to admit that my priorities, thoughts, and concerns just had not changed fundamentally, even though I was living for Jesus.

Unfortunately, many Christians today, even those fighting to practice their faith and live virtuously, have similar experiences. Swimming in a milieu of postmodernism, deconstructionism, and the ensuing existential angst, we naturally find it difficult to center our faith lives in the proper context—in the reality that our life on this earth both will end and is not the end. Combine our modern zeitgeist with how meditation on the Last Things has fallen out of favor in recent decades in the Church, and many Christians find themselves without a deep sense of the meaning of their lives. In fact, many baptized Christians live rather aimlessly without realizing that our Baptism calls us to struggle against concupiscence, an inclination to sin that remains in us even after Baptism. The practice of *memento mori*, or meditation on all of what are called “the Last Things”—death, judgment, hell, and heaven—has been a long, time-honored practice that used to help Christians discover the true meaning

of life and fight our concupiscence. Reviving this practice can help us live our lives in a context that continually brings us back to what is most fundamentally important.

Advent might seem like a liturgical season associated more with the joyful anticipation of Christmas than meditation on death and the other Last Things. But just as no days exist in which a human does not die, there need not be liturgical breaks from remembrance of death. Also, in times past, Advent was recognized as the perfect time to take a hard look at all the Last Things. In fact, it used to be the tradition in some parishes that sermons would be given on each of the Last Things to correspond to the four Sundays of Advent. The loss of this traditional meditation on the Last Things during Advent is a sign that in modern times we have difficulty simultaneously holding the challenging and joyous truths of our faith. Advent is both a time of joyful anticipation and sober preparation. The powerful, paradoxical truth of the Catholic faith demands that we keep these truths in tension.

Advent would mean nothing if Jesus did not come to save us from death, humanity's most intimidating enemy and impossible adversary. Jesus was born to die. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus brought us life. And through opening the gates of heaven, he saved us from hell. All this might seem obvious, but it's crucial, no matter how many years we've been Christians or how practiced we are at the faith, to approach meditation on the Last Things with the humble assumption that none of us live fully according to the proper context of the afterlife.

Our faith involves a struggle to learn to desire only Jesus. As human beings, we are prone to distraction and becoming lost in the passing things of this world. We likely experience this every Advent when, amid a liturgical season that invites us to enter into silent awe, shining lights and tinsel vie for our attention. But this is precisely why meditating on the Last Things during Advent can be so spiritually fruitful. Of the many beneficial ways to celebrate Advent, meditating on the Last Things trains us to recognize what is truly important: God. Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote, "God is the 'last thing' of the creature. Gained, he is heaven; lost, he is hell; examining, he is judgment; purifying, he is

purgatory.” Meditating on the Last Things is completely centered on the God who has come to us in human flesh through the Incarnation and who also will come again at the moment of our death and at the end of the world. Throughout this Advent and even after Christmas celebrations arrive, may we remember our inevitable death and continue to prepare.



Memento mori,

Sr. Theresa Aletheia Noble, FSP

HOW TO USE THIS COMPANION

Memento mori, or remembering death, judgment, hell, and heaven, is a deeply personal practice that can bring complex emotions to the surface. For this reason, it's important to thoughtfully integrate *memento mori* into your spiritual life. To aid you in this journey, this companion has daily prompts for journaling and prayer. You may find it helpful to use *Remember Your Death: Memento Mori Journal* for your reflection and journaling when you respond to these prompts. At the top of each page of the journal is included a *memento mori* quote from Scripture, Church Fathers, or the saints. Whether you use the journal or not, it would be helpful to respond to the daily prompts in this companion in order to integrate this practice into your life on a deeper level. *Memento Mori: Prayers on the Last Things* is another resource that you can pray with as you use this Advent companion. The prayer book includes introductions to each of the Last Things as well as prayers and practices that you can incorporate into your prayer life.

Also, it's important to note that this Advent companion can be used for several Advents. Don't feel like a failure if you are unable to read it every day. Do what you can, and God's grace fills in the gaps. In fact, that is the point of this practice. *Memento mori* is centered on God's grace, not our abilities. Regular remembrance of death is not about being perfect, healthy, and strong (see Ps 73). Rather, we remember our death in order to remember our weakness. We are frail sinners in need of a Savior,

and the Incarnation is a demonstration and celebration of God's strength, not ours.

As you integrate *memento mori* into your life, you may find more fruit in the practice if you are able to connect with those in the community of the Church who are on the same journey. Death is the fate of every human being, but as Christians we also share the hope of eternal life. Together on life's journey, we can help one another to keep both our death in mind and our eyes on Jesus. So consider talking with family and close friends about your journey, ask for their feedback, and invite them to join you. You can share your reflections and responses with the wider online community with the hashtags #mementomori and #livememento-mori. I also encourage you to connect online with the artists who have contributed much of the art in this book, which would not be the same without it.

Memento Mori Skull Symbolism

Resurrection
BUTTERFLY



Victory
LAURELS



Death
SKULL

Humanity
FALLEN LAURELS



FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

DEATH



The Infant Christ Asleep on a Cross, Anonymous, Italian (17th c.), bequest of Grace M. Pugh.

Adventus, the Latin word from which the word “advent” is derived, means “coming” or “arrival.” And indeed, during this season we remember a variety of ways that God comes into our lives. He comes to us in the Incarnation; he comes to us in Baptism; he comes to us throughout the day, even when we do not take notice; he comes to us at the end of our lives in the moment of our death; and he will come to us at the Second Coming at the end of the world. These are the most important arrivals ever to occur, both in our individual lives and in the entire world. We know this deep down, and we also know that we must prepare for these arrivals. Still, during the season of Advent, the preparation of Christmas cards, parties, and gifts often overtakes our immediate attention. Even when we try to live Advent by preparing to welcome Baby Jesus, our efforts easily can become distracted by overly sentimental or secularized aspects of the season.

If we avoid living Advent on a deep spiritual level, it might be because we want to forget the difficult truth that death is waiting for us. Forgetfulness of death is a consequence of original sin that pervades every day of our lives and clouds many of our decisions. But whether we ignore it or not, death will come, so we must be ready. Our life as baptized Christians is not an easy walk; it’s a run, a struggle (see Heb 12:1). And our noble baptized souls, in which God has come to dwell, deserve the dignity and benefits derived from regular meditation on death. For this reason, for many centuries the Christian tradition has emphasized the pious practice of regular meditation on death as an aid in our struggle to live our baptismal graces.

During Advent, when we meditate on the first coming of Christ, the mystery of the Incarnation, we remember also how the Son of God humbled himself and took on human flesh in order to defeat death through his own death. When we meditate on the death of Christ, we may tend to focus mostly on the Cross. But Jesus began to die the moment he came to earth. The divine humiliation of the Incarnation began in the union of the divine nature with feeble human nature, which tends toward death, in the one person of Jesus Christ. By taking

on human nature, the Son of God defeated humanity's greatest foe—permanent death in sin. This is a glorious mystery, a joyful mystery, an astounding mystery!

Meditation on death during Advent allows us to enter deeply into the true meaning of this holy season, the coming in time of the only One who saves us from death. Unfortunately, the world has no patience for long waits, penitential previews, and hushed liturgical seasons that encourage us to silence and meditation. Glitzy Christmas lights appear and parties begin often far before Advent is over, and before we know it, we are catapulted through Advent preparation into Christmas joy. But we cannot truly experience the joy of Christmas without first entering the quiet of Advent. This season calls us to remember that just as death did not spare the Son of God, it will not spare us either. Every person, whether rich or poor, young or old, believer or nonbeliever, is invited to make a choice in life: to ignore death and pretend that life will go on forever or to face death's inevitability. And if we do not accept this invitation to face death now, when will we have another opportunity?

Death is the end of earthly life. Our lives are measured by time, in the course of which we change and grow old and, as with all living beings on earth, death seems like the normal end of life. That aspect of death lends urgency to our lives: remembering our mortality helps us realize that we have only a limited time in which to bring our lives to fulfillment:

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth . . . before the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it [Eccl 12:1, 7].

Death is a consequence of sin. The Church's Magisterium, as authentic interpreter of the affirmations of Scripture and Tradition, teaches that death entered the world on account of man's sin. Even though man's nature is mortal, God had destined him not to die. Death was therefore contrary to the plans of God the Creator and entered the world as a consequence of sin. "Bodily death, from which man would have been immune had he not sinned" is thus "the last enemy" of man left to be conquered [*Gaudium et Spes*, 18 § 2].

Death is transformed by Christ. Jesus, the Son of God, also himself suffered the death that is part of the human condition. Yet, despite his anguish as he faced death, he accepted it in an act of complete and free submission to his Father's will. The obedience of Jesus has transformed the curse of death into a blessing.

Because of Christ, Christian death has a positive meaning: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" [Phil 1:21].

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nos. 1007–1010)

