

On Death XV

What to expect, we wonder, as death approaches.

Approaching death is a challenge for us all, even though all of us will pass through that portal. I recall not so long ago visiting with a person who was dying who wanted me to tell her what to expect. Although as a nurse and more so as a priest I have attended the bedside of innumerable dying persons, having never died myself, I really cannot say what it is like. I do know that ultimately people reach that moment with a desire to move on - even people who have no faith tradition seem to reach the place of resignation, or acceptance of death's reality. I was able to tell the one I mentioned above that when she got to the threshold of death, she would know it; it would be unmistakable. St. Francis called death "brother death" because he recognized that the inevitable was not so much an enemy as an open invitation. As the time for death draws near most people turn away from their families and closest associates; we used to say in the hospital that when they turn to the wall of the hospital room, death was coming soon. Sometimes it is in joyful expectation; sometimes it is in something like resignation or even despair. When sacraments and faith and love surround the person, they tend to go peacefully; when there is nothing but a blank wall, perhaps it is less so. Another phenomenon we noted at nearly all deaths in the hospital was that the dying person would begin to see loved ones long gone standing "just outside the door." There is a famous story of a young boy who was dying of leukemia asking his Dad what it would be like; his Dad told him it would be like "falling asleep" and that image gave sufficient comfort to the boy. In fact the ancient Christians called death "falling asleep" even Jesus in John's gospel refers to the death of his friend Lazarus as "falling asleep."

IHM Pray for us.

Fr. Jerry