A Time to Die: Monks on the Threshold of Eternal Life

(Nicolas Diat)

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A Time to Die is a small gem of a book which works on two levels. On one level, it is a self-examination for the reader, offering him a glimpse of a very specific kind of life and thought, thereby helping him think about his own death. On another level, it is an examination of the decline of our civilization. The monasteries profiled, and the view of human life and death their monks embody, seem like small wooden lifeboats—tiny, fragile, and tossed on the sea of liquid modernity, mere fragments of the glorious past of French monasticism. But are they as fragile as they seem? Or, if the future turns upward, are they rather the vanguard, seeds of a new thing?

The author, Nicolas Diat, is a French journalist, and a frequent collaborator with Robert Cardinal Sarah on his books. Cardinal Sarah wrote the Foreword for this book, and Diat dedicated the book to him. The Cardinal is, of course, a prominent opponent of Pope Francis and his noxious embrace of modernity—both would publicly deny that, but it's the reality. But this is most definitely not a book about current controversies in the Roman Church. Rather, it is meant as a book about how the present does not really matter. It is an attempt, through the lens of discussions with monks, to, as Cardinal Sarah says, "better understand that death is the most important act of earthly existence," which opens a portal to God, fulfilling man's purpose on Earth.

Now, I probably think about death more than the average person. I also reviewed, last year, Seneca's thoughts on death, and it crops up fairly frequently in my writings, and more often in my thoughts—many times a day. Just in case anyone is worrying, or hoping, I am not, to my knowledge, in danger of any particular form of death. Nor am I depressed in the least, or morbid, although I suppose that latter is a somewhat subjective judgment, and it is certainly true that I am keenly aware of my own death. The primary consequence isn't fear or disheartenment, but rather a constant sense of, as I call it, the "closing window," the ever-diminishing time in which to accomplish what I am to accomplish (not that what that is, is clear to me). It's merely a personality trait; along the

same lines, I have always liked cemeteries, and am not afraid to picture myself there, although reading the inscriptions is what I like most about them. You will certainly never find me committing suicide—if they say I did, remember that they said the same thing about Jeffrey Epstein, and please hunt for the real killers.

Anyway, setting the tone for the book, Diat begins with a lengthy description of the dying of Brother Vincent, a canon of Lagrasse Abbey, in Languedoc, who died in 2016 at age thirty-eight, of aggressive multiple sclerosis. (Brother Vincent is also featured in Cardinal Sarah's *The Power of Silence*.) Diat then visits, for a few days each, seven other abbeys, with Carthusians, Trappists, Cistercians, Benedictines, and more, talking to the monks and, several times, seeing and describing the rites surrounding a monk's death. Those rites differ from abbey to abbey, but have much in common, most of all the atmosphere of hope, tempered by modest sadness. Other times Diat describes deaths from decades past, particularly those difficult or drawn-out, that linger in the memories of their surviving brothers. His purpose is to explain how the monks view death, in contrast to modern views in the West.

As Diat notes, throughout the West, the "liturgy of death" used to be well-known and accepted. By that he means the rituals, both secular and religious, that surrounded death and its approach. There was little distinction between monastic death and death in the countryside or the city, and that liturgy made death "humane." But "Twenty-first-century man is condemned to lonely endings, without love, in anonymous hospital rooms." It is not that modern man is better off, or that it is easier for him to die. "Today, the liturgy of death no longer exists. Yet fear and anxiety have never been as strong. Men no longer know how to die." It's actually much harder for modern man to die—he may live a little bit longer, but to what end, really?

But that does not mean monks always die gloriously and peacefully, without fear or puzzlement. "Human laws are true for all, even men of God: fear of death, fear of grief, fear of forgetting are instinctive in each of us." Many of the dying monks are anxious. Sick monks can complain and demand. And several times Diat notes the existence of various forms of mental illness among the monks. The lightest of these are obsessions such as hypochondria, or particular phobias, which can cause great consternation in monks facing death (for example, a fear

of asphyxiation). Depression is also not uncommon; Diat discusses a monk who committed suicide, on the day after Easter no less, and makes clear that other monks suffer similarly, a feeling one describes as being in a box with no way out but death.

Although a calm, prepared death is the ideal, the monks understand, too, that "Christ himself did not die in tranquility." Death is a passage for all, but "There are as many reactions to death as there are men." One of the interesting things about this book is the variety of approaches among different monastic orders and different monks to anticipating their own future deaths, and to viewing the deaths of their brothers. Some monks are placid when another dies; others grieve openly; others fear for themselves. These are not, it appears, spiritual fears, of failing to make the cut in front of Saint Peter, but rather the simple fears of all men in the face of what is unknown, even to those with a devout faith. "I am very nervous about dying, like I was before taking an exam. The immensity of what awaits us in heaven is frightening."

The monks strongly prefer to die in the monastery, in the old way. A repeated theme is modern monks' aversion to excessive medical treatment, and in particular to dying in a hospital, hooked up to tubes and machines, rather than dying simply in the presence of their brothers, encouraged and comforted by the abbot. Sometimes monks fall into the modern error of desperately prolonging life, but as one abbot says, "If a monk allows himself to be dragged into this game, he loses the meaning of his religious profession, which consists in the knowledge we owe our lives to Another." Artificially extending life to an excessive degree is anathema to them, but they must balance, in each case, what medical treatment to seek, for themselves and for their brothers unable to make their own decisions, which complicates life relative to the past, when such options were not available.

Similarly, sedation is strongly disfavored, since it can prevent a monk from passing over under his own power, as it were. This is most of all true of its use to kill the patient—there is a passing reference to the "Claeys-Leonetti Law," which is, I discovered, a 2016 French law supposedly merely allowing for "deep and continuous sedation," but is actually a method of killing patients by drugging them while cutting off food and water. Even lesser sedation is disfavored by monks, except to help through a crisis of anxiety: "The excess of painkillers plunges

the sick into nebulous states that cut them off from the moment they are going to experience." I am very sympathetic to what one abbot says more generally of monks preparing to die, although it is not, strictly speaking, Christian doctrine: "He wants us to be able to say 'yes' or 'no.' We sense him coming. We see a great light because God awaits our response. He asks us if we want him." To be sure, if this belief is true (which I have long thought makes a great deal of sense, that we are given a final choice), we do not need to be physically awake to be asked the question. But death under artificial sleep is antithetical to the monks' approach to life, and to God.

The sum of these ways of approaching death is quite different from the pre-Christian approach, exemplified in its most developed form in the Stoic philosophy of Seneca, discussed by James Romm in his translation of Seneca, *How to Die*. Seneca was all about dying well, but by that he meant suicide (he would have been fine with euthanasia), not that one should prepare for, and navigate, the passage with humble confidence in a better world beyond. Seneca did not anticipate any afterlife, and he would have thought revolving preparation for death around that hope silly. He would have agreed with one of the French abbots, however, that "Fear is a bad counselor," though not for the reason the abbot gives, "It is the ultimate antithesis of faith." The modern attitude, embodied in Claeys-Leonetti and rejected by the monks, is a reversion to the pagan ways of the past—in part, the high pagan ways of Seneca, and in part, to the vicious pagan ways that were far more common and which Christianity largely alleviated in the West for two thousand years. Or perhaps not so weirdly, since so much of modernity is such a backsliding, from abortion to sexual degeneracy—it is all a package. And, as I said in my review of Romm's book, the main problem with allowing suicide is not that men like Seneca choose it—rather, it is that the weak and defenseless are forced to choose it.

Even with the inherently somber matter of the book, Diat weaves an enchanting picture of each of these monasteries—old, or ancient, buildings; beautiful natural surroundings, both flora and fauna; peaceful monks. The life of the monks is portrayed as an arc, with an enthusiastic youth, sometimes troubled middle, and more joyful, preparatory old age. Given the narrow focus of this book, Diat does not discuss the erosion of monastic life during the troubles following Vatican II, where

many monks in their middle age left the monasteries. He does make passing mention of the tortured earlier history of French monasticism, destroyed by the 1789 Revolution and only decades later partially restored. Nearly all monastic property was stolen by the French state, either during the Revolution or during the turbulent, and frequently viciously anti-religious, nineteenth century, culminating in the French "Associations Law" of 1901, a core left-wing desideratum, which again essentially banned religious communities.

I know little about this history, and this book assumes the reader knows the details, so it is unclear to me to what degree monastic life in France has recovered, and what the current arc and projected future of it is. Diat spends no time discussing what lies ahead for French monasticism. The reader is not told how many monks there are relative to the past, and of those, how many are young—that is, is monasticism dying out, or rebounding? Naturally, where the topic is death, the old are usually the focus, but there is fairly frequent mention of young monks, which suggests at least some rebound.

But the monks face headwinds other than declining membership. The bigger element adding uncertainty to the future of French monasticism is the changing face of France, as Muslim invaders swarm all over the country, not only in the big cities but, increasingly, in the smaller towns where most of these monasteries are located. In a future Muslim-dominated state, if the French do not wake up first, the fate of these abbeys is likely to be worse and more permanent than under the Revolution, which was bad enough (Solesmes Abbey, for example, one of those profiled here, had its eight-hundred-year-old archive burnt by the knuckle-dragging left-winger who moved in). Although the French government and the European media rigorously suppress evidence of Muslim crimes, occasionally videos surface briefly (before they are censored) of gangs of young Muslims harassing Christians in small French towns. One can only imagine how Muslims, if they were in charge, would treat communities of French Christian monks in their ancient Christian buildings. One can get a hint of it from how the French Protestants sacked and abused several of these monasteries during the sixteenth-century French wars of religion, or, of course, from how Muslims freed from strongman rule in the Middle East often behave. Martyrdom, not covered here, would no doubt come back into fashion.

Does it matter? How much relevance does, or could, monasticism have in the modern world, which is wholly antithetical to all the principles of all monks (not just French monks, but those of the Orthodox, as well, with their somewhat different practices but similar views on life)? Perhaps, in a renewed Europe, monks could be the seeds of a new order. The purpose of a contemplative monk, of course, is to follow Christ more perfectly, and not worry about such things. Still, those in charge of the secular state can, and always have, cooperated with the monks to improve society, and perhaps a new, well-run society could do the same. So I wouldn't count the monks out yet. Perhaps they will boom. Rod Dreher's "Benedict Option" sees lay Christian believers as the new monks, carrying the torch through a new dark age to the sunlit uplands beyond. It would be God's little joke if the old monks again played a key role in that process. Or, more foreseeable, perhaps the military orders will return, to work hand in glove with their contemplative brothers to bring a fresh *novus ordo seclorum* to the world. One can hope, at least.