be not afraid
FACING FEAR WITH FAITH
SAMUEL WELLS
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Preface

I have the wonderful privilege of being a pastor, writer, preacher, teacher, scholar, counselor, organizational leader, chaplain, university administrator, speaker, community leader, interfaith dialogue partner, mentor, and leader of worship all at the same time, and sometimes all on the same day. These reflections arise out of the intersection of these roles and opportunities.

But there is always something more important than what you are doing, and that is with whom you are doing it. And this is what has made the shaping of these reflections such a rewarding experience. Among those who have materially enriched the content of this volume are friends and colleagues, notably Jo Bailey Wells, Nancy Ferree-Clark, Abby Kocher, Meghan Feldmeyer, and Craig Kocher. Among the many who have in other ways shared the crafting of word and prayer are Rodney Wynkoop, Allan Friedmann, David Arcus, Gaston Warner, Keith Daniel, Emily Wilson-Hauger, Lucy Worth, Bob Parkins, Stanley Hauerwas, Ellen Davis, Kavin Rowe, Richard Hays, Greg Jones, Ray Barfield, Norman Wirzba, Tony Galanos, Richard Brodhead, John Kiess, Ana Kiess, Trygve Johnson, and David Hartley. Special thanks go to Rebekah Eklund, who has offered patience, humor, wisdom, and understanding in carefully and skillfully editing the manuscript and offering a great many modifications and improvements.

The book is dedicated to my sister, Charis Geoghegan. She appears in these pages, as she appears in my life, in sunshine and in rain, in joy and in tragedy, in timely counsel and in abiding companionship, in fear and in faith. I cannot imagine my life without hers.

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Introduction

This is a book of diverse reflections around a single theme. There may be some readers who sit and read it from cover to cover. But I suspect as many or more will visit different parts of the book as their appetite for encouragement in faith, challenge in discipleship, reassurance amid doubt, and exploration of the Scripture varies.

Each reflection is designed to speak to gut, head, heart, and hand—often in that order. Fear is a sensation of the gut. When I seek to assist others in meeting God in Christ, I begin with the gut. Whether writing, preaching, or offering pastoral counsel, the first questions I’m asking are: Where does this hurt? Why does this matter? What part of me can’t rest until this issue is faced? What am I running away from? What can’t be said? How can this paper, sermon, or conversation be the most important one I’ve ever written, offered, or had?

Although I have spent most of my working life in local churches, I currently work in a university context. And that gives me permission, indeed requires me, to speak to the head. And so the second set of questions I’m asking are: What is interesting about this subject? What is something I’ve never heard someone talk about before? How does this subject or part of the Bible connect to other subjects or other parts of the Bible? Is the Christian faith discredited in the face of suffering, science, and other faiths, or bankrupted in the face of imperialism, racism, and sexism? How can I bring faith to intellect and intellect to faith?
Once I have faced these first two sets of questions, the reflection has largely taken shape. Then it is time to address the third set of questions, those of the heart: How will these words move people? How will they be memorable—unforgettable perhaps? Rather than settle for conventional humility, how will these words become the most helpful or thrilling words their readers or hearers have ever read or heard? Why stop writing until I am confident they will be, at least for some? This isn’t wholly or even largely about including stories or leaving room for humor. It’s more importantly about realizing which are the points that really matter and staying with them while you give them a chance to take up residence in the reader’s or listener’s soul. It’s also a question of balance. These reflections are designed to be read all at one go or one by one—but they are gathered together for a reason. If you write or speak always and only from and to the heart, you may be dismissed as sentimental or patronized as folksy. But if you are respected as someone who writes and speaks to and from the head and valued as someone who writes and speaks to and from the gut, then when you address the heart there is an element of surprise that means your words are more likely to have the desired effect.

The final set of questions concerns the hand. As a pastor and a theologian, my principal role is to explore and portray the wonders of God in Christ. It’s often a mistake to be sidetracked too quickly by the question, “So what?” Such a question reinforces the reader’s or listener’s assumption that they are the center of the universe—which may be a big part of the problem. Nonetheless the reflections in this book are all written with a conviction that the Christian gospel shapes and reshapes every aspect of life, and it’s important to point that out in appropriate detail with enough challenge to disturb but enough reassurance and encouragement to motivate. These questions are the simplest: How do I imagine my readers’ or hearers’ lives will be different after reading or hearing this? What do I want them actually to do? How do I feel about calling upon people to embody a lifestyle of which I am not an especially good example? Rather than constantly attacking bad examples of how people engage money, sex, and power, am I taking the time and the risk of trying to offer good examples in a realistic, thoughtful, detailed, and compassionate way?
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Only when I believe I have addressed all four of these sets of questions am I confident that I genuinely have something to say.

The reflections in this volume are gathered around the theme of fear. I want to spend a few moments setting the tone for this book by describing how Jesus addresses fear. In doing so I am also seeking to illustrate how I go about speaking to gut, head, heart, and hand. Thus I hope to introduce both the form and the content of the book. I want to talk about fear, and about what the story of Jesus’s transfiguration teaches us about fear.

I wonder whether you know what it’s like to be terrified. I wonder if you’ve ever had that twisting screwdriver at the base of your stomach, that trembling shiver under your lower spine, that drying of the throat and tightening of the chest, the instinctive slow shaking of the head and the glazed staring of the eyes that says “Oh . . . my . . . God.”

I want to take you into the mind’s eye of Peter, James, and John after they followed the Jesus they thought they knew up a mountain (Matt. 17:1–8). They saw his face transfigured and become dazzling white, and they saw the Old Testament creak open and Moses and Elijah walk out of its pages, good as new, and park themselves on either side of Jesus. And then a big cloud came over like a flyover at the Super Bowl and the sky started speaking—that’s right, the sky started speaking—about being Jesus’s Father. And the three disciples did the obvious thing—they ran behind the sofa because they were terrified out of their tiny minds.

Fear isn’t itself good or bad. It’s an emotion that identifies what we love. The quickest way to discover what or whom someone loves is to find out what they are afraid of. We fear because we don’t want to lose what we love. We fear intensely when we love intensely or when we think what or whom we love is in real danger. So a world without fear wouldn’t be a good thing, because it wouldn’t just be a world without danger—it would be a world without love.¹

If you think back to times of intense fear, sometimes it’s so horrible you can’t bear to think about it. But sometimes it’s different.

¹. For extended reflections on fear that have shaped this and the next paragraph, see Scott Bader-Saye, Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007). Bader-Saye offers an illuminating discussion of Thomas Aquinas’s description of the object of fear as a future evil that is imminent, of great magnitude, and threatening the loss of something we rightly love.
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Sometimes those fearful moments are periods when you feel most fully alive. I think that’s because at those moments you’re most aware of the things and the people you love. When you feel death or danger is near, you want to be with the people that matter in the places that matter, and you want to squeeze hands and hold people close and tell them what you need to tell them. After years of ignoring, forgetting, or neglecting those who mattered most, fear sometimes puts you right in touch with them. Sometimes you even feel a profound bond with complete strangers, based on common need or humanity. And maybe afterward you or they wish that a lot more of life could be like that.

We live in a time when politics is dominated by fear, and when politicians claim to be able to take away fear by somehow abolishing it. The phrase “War on Terror” suggests fear is something you can somehow kill. But our witness as Christians is to say that in some ways fear is a good thing, because it discloses our love. We show our faith precisely in the way we respond to fear, and in the way we show our love.

On the mountain, the disciples saw Jesus transfigured alongside Moses and Elijah, with the thundering voice from heaven declaring Jesus’s unique identity and unlimited authority: “This is my beloved Son: listen to him.” They were terrified. They thought they knew Jesus. They knew he was something special. He’d been voted MVP—Most Valuable Prophet—two seasons running. If it were today he’d have been on talk shows and T-shirts and YouTube by now. But this was something terrifying. Jesus was joined by the two biggest-name alumni in the Old Testament—and the whole of the history of Israel was present in him. Meanwhile Jesus was blessed and authorized by the voice of God, and clearly the whole presence and power of God was in him. He was the place where the closest humanity had ever come to God met the closest God had ever come to humanity. Not surprisingly, the disciples’ legs turned to jelly. All the heightened awareness, all the hugging of strangers, all the screwdriver tummy and the shivering lower spine, all the realizing what they truly love and wanting to cling to what most matters—it’s all here, because these disciples realize that they’re looking at the nature and destiny of humankind, straight in the face.

Look at what happens next in the story. This is where we discover what Jesus does about fear. He does four things. “But Jesus came
and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid’” (Matt. 17:7). First, Jesus comes to the disciples. No shouting from afar, no ridiculing, no criticizing, no embarrassing, no trivial saying, “Hey, you guys, I guess you don’t know my friends Mo and Eli—Moses this is Pete, Elijah this is Jamie…”—no, none of that. Jesus comes to them. He makes the first move. He makes the journey across their fear.

And then, second, it says Jesus touches them. Did you notice that? He touched them. I’ll never forget the moment when I was told my mother was about to die. I was eighteen years old and three thousand miles away. Of course I was in pieces. A man I hardly knew started telling me mindless irrelevances about when his grandmother had died, but none of it mattered because what he did was to cup my hands in his and to look at me and hold me. He touched me. And I was not so afraid. And ever since then when I’ve trained people for ministry and discipleship I’ve said to them, “Maybe the most important thing in your ministry will not be what you say but the way you learn to hold people and to touch them when they are afraid.”

And so I look back at what Jesus does on the mountain and see that he touched each of the disciples before he said anything. He made the journey across their fear and he held them in the midst of their fear, by touching them.

Only then, third, does he speak. First he says, “Get up.” Now this is interesting. The disciples are obviously still petrified. But Jesus has come to them and touched them. So now it’s time for them to get up. Jesus encourages them to get up while they’re still frightened. I wonder if these words mean anything to you. Jesus invites them to get up while they’re still frightened. He knows they’re still frightened. But, frightened or not, it’s time to get up. The disciples have realized what they rightly love, but they are gradually realizing that what they rightly love is not genuinely threatened. It’s just magnified beyond anything they could previously imagine and closer to them than they could ever have known. That’s a lot to take in, but the best place to do it isn’t face down on the ground.

Then, fourth and finally, Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid.” This hardly needs saying after the previous three things have taken place—Jesus comes to them, touches them, and raises them to their feet. They look up and they see what was there at the beginning of time and what will be there at the end of time: nothing but Jesus, nothing but
God’s life so shaped as to be present to us. What they were afraid of turned out to be Jesus. And Jesus was there to touch them, raise them, and send them on their way.

Now we can see what has just taken place in this fourfold action of coming, touching, raising, and empowering. It’s a microcosm of the whole gospel story. Jesus first comes to us in his incarnation. Jesus then comes to us in his teaching and healing ministry. And then in his cross and resurrection and in the coming of his Spirit at Pentecost Jesus raises us up and clothes us with power and gives us reason not to be afraid. The whole gospel is in this single verse: and the verse begins with the disciples face down on the ground in terror. So if you feel like those disciples, feel like hiding behind the sofa because the truth is against you or putting your face down to the ground because reality is too much for you, then hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus comes to you. Jesus touches and holds you. Jesus gently puts you back on your feet. And Jesus says to you, “Don’t be afraid.”

Every time we pray, this story can shape what we hope for and what we think we’re doing. We always come before God with fear: fear that our lives and our troubles are so large and looming, and God won’t be enough for us; or fear that our lives and our troubles are so trivial and foolish, and God will be too much for us. Like the disciples, our heads are down and our face is in our hands. And as we pray Jesus comes to us. He makes that long journey of incarnation every single time we lie face down in fear. And Jesus touches us. He comes in Scripture, in insight, in pictures, in words, in wisdom, in kindness, but most of all in tender, uncomplicated, human form. And then Jesus tells us it’s time to finish praying and get up. And then there’s only one thing stopping us from setting about his business. And he deals with that by saying, “Don’t be afraid.”

My prayer is that this book may offer such moments of encounter with the transfigured Christ for all who read it. The heart of the gospel speaks into the most numbing and terrifying moments and dimensions of our lives, with words of hope and joy amid fear and bewilderment. The chapters in this book proceed on the conviction that there is no aspect of human existence that faith need avoid and that is not ripe for transformation by the grace of the gospel. This book is designed for the layperson seeking a direct articulation of the faith in relation to pressing questions of the day. It should also
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be of use to pastors seeking confidence to address complex issues in the light of the gospel. It is not a book about fear, but an attempt to address the gospel and many issues of the day in faith and without fear. Death, weakness, power, difference, faith, and life represent a fair selection of the kinds of questions Christians are sometimes reluctant to face head-on. This book is offered as an encouragement to Christians to do so and to find blessings and abundant life in doing so.
The most important quality in a companion is their commitment not to run away from you when you are facing the terrifying prospect of death. If faith in God can address the subject of death, then it can be set free to speak to every other aspect of life.

Fear is a terrible, isolating, paralyzing, numbing, echoing thing. The person who loves you doesn’t change the subject, say it may never happen, go and get you lots of candy to cheer you up, or sit you in front of the TV and try to distract you. The person that loves you looks you right in the face and says, “I’m sorry.” Those words say, “It’s frightening, it’s humiliating, it makes you feel powerless and frustrated and sad, but it’s not going to scare me away, I’m not going to make a joke or change the subject. I’m going to look right into the heart of it with you and we’ll stare it down together.”

Of course we’re all going to die one day, and we become so adept at ignoring or obscuring that unalterable reality that it’s easy to become impatient with someone who’s facing up to their own mortality. A voice in each of us says, “What’s so special about you? What about me!” So the person who can look you straight in the face as you name the truth of your own mortality isn’t just crossing a barrier of
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intimacy, they’re resisting a childlike insistence that all the attention should be on them. That’s what it means to be a companion—being with someone as they face how bad things really are and not changing the subject or drawing attention back to yourself.

To speak of faith in the face of death means to name our worst fears and gently but purposefully bring them into conversation with our deepest convictions. That is what the following reflections seek to do.
Woody Allen reportedly once said, “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying.” Not long ago I sat by the bedside of a man who felt just the same way. He knew he had only a few days left to live. “I want to do something for my wife and my children,” he said, “and maybe for my friends as well. I can’t think of anything I can give them now, stuck here in this bed.” I said to him, “Have you ever thought that you’re more than capable of giving them one of the most precious gifts anyone could give, a gift all the more precious because it’s so rare?” “What gift might that be?” he said. I waited to see if he would look at his circumstances and guess for himself, but after some moments of silence, I said, “A good death.”

What is a good death? A good death is a window into the glory of God. A good death is a revelation of Paul’s conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38–39). The reality of modern medicine is that relatively few of us will be fully conscious, lucid, and full of parting wisdom up to the very moment of our deaths. As one person said, “On the plus side, death is one of the few things that can be done just as easily lying down.” The various tubes and machines will more often than
not keep us technically going for some period of time after our last conscious thought or word. So we need to start getting our plans in order now, ahead of time, if we intend to give our families, friends, and society the gift of a good death. Preparing us for a good death forces us to live a good life. The less you can do about the length of your life, the more you need to attend to its breadth and depth.

We probably all know people who are either so worried about the future or so angry, regretful, or otherwise burdened about the past that they seem to spend little or none of their lives in the present tense. The first thing to hope for as we approach the reality of death is to find or receive the grace to be present, to live in the present tense. Finding the ability to live in the present is very similar to what many people call being “at peace.” To live in the present tense and be at peace in the face of death requires two things.

First, it requires us to believe that the past is taken care of. This is fundamentally a matter of coming to terms with our humanity. Few of us can honestly say our lives turned out as we had hoped or expected. It’s easy, perhaps natural, to apportion blame for that. If grievances and resentments are heavy on our heart and the gift of forgiveness hasn’t accompanied a long journey of healing, it can be easy to blame others for everything. But we can just as easily blame ourselves. For a great many people, the difficulty of accepting forgiveness is at least as much of an obstacle to a good death as the difficulty of offering forgiveness. Yet we can also blame life (or God, whichever we choose to call it) for the quirks of science, nature, the economy, or history that made our lives less than we would have liked them to be. In the words of one rueful commentator, “Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering—and it’s all over much too soon.” Whether mocked or praised by others, whether starting from great privilege and prospects or from lowly fortune and station, whether littered with accolades and achievements or with setbacks and shame, so many of us regard our lives as more or less a failure.

In all these ways looking back on the past is coming to terms with our humanity, with the humanity of those around us, and with the limitations and weaknesses of the human spirit. Life and death are both about coming to terms with these limitations, and for the person who has learned to live with others, with themselves, and
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with the contingency of circumstances, we have a word: we call that person *patient*. I noted above that living in the present tense requires two things, and that the first one is to believe the past is taken care of. The second one, which might seem even more pressing in the face of death, is to believe the future is taken care of. If letting go of the past is fundamentally about coming to terms with our humanity, opening our lives wholeheartedly to the future is fundamentally about coming to terms with God’s divinity. The future is unknown. For many people the unknown that lies beyond the threshold of death is simply the most terrifying thing in all human comprehension, precisely because it defies human comprehension. I’m going to attempt briefly to break that terror down into its constituent elements, to make it easier to talk about.

For some people the big fear beyond death is judgment. For most of Christian history this has been what Christianity was really all about—preparing you to face the finality of judgment, and its bifurcation between heaven and hell. It’s amazing how this has become so much less of an issue to people in the last 150 years, and consequently how attention has focused so much more on the conditions and possibilities and desire for justice in this present life. Nonetheless, the fear of hell weighs heavy on many of us as we approach death. While we may not imagine perpetual fire or gnashing of teeth, it’s not hard to imagine being alone forever, a very gloomy prospect. And if one adds to that the possibility of everlasting pain, it’s too oppressive to think about.

Perhaps the biggest fear for the contemporary imagination, captivated as most of us are by the realization and fulfillment of the individual self, is that beyond death lies simply oblivion. It is rationally hard to square the myriad complexity and texture of human existence before death with total emptiness afterward. But when we witness the mundane biological process of death in animals and plants, there can seem little observational reason for arguing that humans will be significantly different. As Johnny Carson is rumored to have said, “For three days after death, hair and fingernails continue to grow—but phone calls taper off.” We’re left with just our bodies and the worms. All the restorative qualities of sleep suddenly go out the window, and we are faced with a sleep without end, a complete annihilation of the self—for many of us, a horrifying prospect.

5
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In the face of this, St. Paul writes these stirring words, which conclude the eighth chapter of his Letter to the Romans: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul is addressing precisely these overwhelming fears—the fear of judgment, or at least of being eternally alone or perpetually in pain, and the fear of oblivion, of one’s consciousness being wiped out of the drama of existence. He is telling his readers, “Each one of you is precious in God’s sight. You are not merely biological human products. You are known, loved, called, redeemed, chosen. And you will be glorified. A whole set of forces may be against you—hostile others, troubling and extreme circumstances, even yourself—but if God is on your side, none of these will overcome you; indeed, you will overcome them, with something to spare. No power, nothing in the past, nothing in the future, no biological necessity, no demise of human cells, no amount of pain, and no sense of isolation will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

So in the face of our fear of judgment, the good news is that God in Christ is for us. This is what we discover in Jesus’s healing ministry in Galilee and what we see when Jesus takes the world’s punishment on our behalf on Golgotha. And in the face of oblivion the good news is God in Christ is with us. This is what we realize is God’s earthly purpose when Jesus comes among us as a baby at Christmas, and what we discover is God’s eternal purpose when Jesus returns to us as our risen Lord at Easter. God is for us and God is with us. “If God is for us, who is against us?” writes Paul (Rom. 8:31). This is the essence of the good news of Christ.

To bring these claims back to our mundane and needy emotional experience, our biggest fears about those we love are that either they will come to hate us or they will forget about us. Paul is telling us that in our eternal relationship with God neither of these eventualities is possible. God cannot turn against us and God cannot forget about us. Because of Jesus we will remain perpetually at the forefront of God’s heart and mind. This is the gospel. This is the good news about the future that enables us to see our lives through to a good death.
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That doesn’t mean we don’t still have fears about judgment and oblivion. The point about the assurance of Paul’s words is that they enable us to face the future in spite of our fears about judgment and oblivion. Faith doesn’t obliterate fear, but it enables us to live without being paralyzed by fear and thus to take the practical steps that witness to our hope beyond death. For the person who is able to live in this assurance, for the person who is able to find the grace to go on in the face of fear, for the person who can open their life to the unknown realm beyond death, we have a word: we call that person courageous.

And that brings me back to the conversation I had at that hospital bedside. The gift of a good death, that last and most precious gift one can give one’s family, friends, and society, is fundamentally a witness of patience and courage. Patience to accept one’s powerlessness to change the past, and courage to open one’s life to the overwhelming unknown of the future. Patience to live with one’s humanity, and courage to face God’s divinity. That is what it means to make a final offering of a good death.

That’s why it’s so hard to accept that the practice of euthanasia can ever constitute a good death. The irony is that the word euthanasia literally means “good death.” It’s an awful thing to watch a loved one face a slow and painful, perhaps agonizing, decline toward an inevitable but perhaps relatively distant death. Few of us would find words to criticize a loved one who looked to a technological escape from a situation of progressive and extreme physical distress and debilitation. But our compassion shouldn’t blind us to the fact that there’s a genuine difference between passively withholding treatment and active euthanasia.

Continuing treatment, if treatment is no more than delaying the moment of death, serves no purpose. As Arthur Hugh Clough put it, “Thou shalt not kill; but needst not strive / Officiously to keep alive.” But actively killing, which is what euthanasia entails, is another matter. Killing those we can’t cure and those whose pain we can’t ease is an outright rejection of the claims of Paul in Romans 8. Euthanasia is a denial that God is for us and that God is with us. Euthanasia assumes that patience and courage are too much to

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expect of anybody. Euthanasia is a statement that perpetual oblivion is better than temporary agony. The legacy bequeathed by the practice of euthanasia is a world that has turned life into a disposable commodity, sees memory as a burden and hope as a fantasy, assumes friendship is inadequate and that we each die alone, and thus has no particular use for patience or courage, the only virtues that can really give us a good death.

Imagine a society without patience and courage. A society without patience is one that values only what can be had straightaway, searches for technological solutions to every problem, denies the existence of issues that can’t be quickly and forcibly resolved, and ends up describing as solutions anything that seems to make the problem go away, even if the solution is worse than the problem. A society without courage has nothing to offer in the face of fear except perpetual distraction through entertainment, stimulation, or fantasy. It’s a society that has left truth and reality behind and headed off in search of something less demanding.

And so a genuinely good death is a gift not just to one’s friends and family but also to society as a whole. A genuinely good death not only requires and inspires patience and courage on the part of the individual, but it also requires and inspires a matching patience and courage on the part of family, friends, and society, because it can be a fearful and paralyzing thing to watch a person you love decline, diminish, and quite possibly suffer. If the dying person cannot, for good reasons or bad, find the resources to exhibit patience and courage, their family and friends simply have to supply the shortfall. A genuinely good death is a witness from all parties and to all parties that patience and courage are possible, even in the face of profound sadness, even in the face of crippling fear, even in the face of trying and distressing circumstances. A genuinely good death proclaims that God is for us and God is with us and nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. A genuinely good death is a window into the glory of God, a promise that, in Christ, the future is always bigger than the past, a moment of truth that says what lies ahead is not a threat of obliteration but the gift of completion. God has given us the assurance of God’s love and the promise of God’s presence, whatever happens. Let us resolve to give God in return the most significant witness we can offer: the gift of a good death.