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Posthumous Longevity

An open letter to a cloistered community of Benedictine nuns, 1989

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Ivan ILLICH: Posthumous Longevity

An open letter to a cloistered community of Benedictine nuns, 1989

Dear Mother Prioress:

When I spoke with you and Lady Abbess after Advent Vespers you urged me to remember my ties to your sisters. I can assure you that I never forget the roots I have on your side of the grill and the strength I draw from your community's love. And now, prompted by you and Mother Abbess, I invite you all to share a bit in my life. This letter is primarily a plea for prayer for a helpless woman in serious distress, a woman who is my friend. Some of you might also feel moved to accept these lines as an invitation to accompany me to the evil Newland into which she has strayed, and come to agree with me that this region deserves your attention as contemplative nuns.

I am writing to you as one who was already my friend when, a quarter of a century ago, you became a nun. This allows me to write freely and in a personal manner on a very touchy subject. But you will have noticed that I address you as "Prioress." Doing so I am able to speak without worrying about the traps that lie in the domain of privacy and that destroy the traditional style of openness that was historically characteristic for our ascetical communities. What I write does not call for secretiveness but for utmost discretion.

Let no one among your sisters take scandal at my writing about two real people, myself and a friend. There is something concrete and surprisingly new here on which we - you and the Church - need *discretio*. Discretion, which Benedict called "the mother of virtues," is the measured discernment of unique situations; it makes our obedience the very opposite of regimentation. The reflection that I want to foster demands discretion on the part of the reader, but this does not make it private. Privacy is a newfangled social construct. It depends on possessive individualism which forms divisive opinions. What I want you to share with me is not an opinion, but an almost unbearable anguish at the commemoration of the *undead* who have slipped out of the reach of our ordinary forms of charity.

I want you to pray for my friend. She was born early in this century, brought up as an upper middle class daughter, and was never touched by faith; she never tasted prayer. Throughout our

acquaintance, I admired and suffered her un-godly and grace-less moral beauty. Though these two words may seem offensive in modern English, I use them deliberately, albeit with apprehension. I know of no others that would allow me to note the absence of an evangelical dimension but which, emphatically, imply no evil and tarnish no beauty.

As a young woman, my friend left her own country. She did so in protest against her philistine family, against the sickness of Nazism and as an alternative to the kitsch in which others of her class and generation tried to save their conscience. She settled in the forest of Scandinavia; there she lived in obstinate, solitary independence. She earned her living by spinning, weaving and teaching her skills in a trade school. She also shaped haunting, abstract objects, creating them out of the stuff she had woven on her loom. Occasionally, some of her "sculptures" received international recognition. We came to know each other discussing a soft, long, brown woolen cloth that she had drawn into tight knots spaced at irregular intervals and arranged on aluminum spikes in front of a dull mirror.

When my friend felt that the time had come to let herself die, she looked to me. We had just taken a walk through the woods to a little restaurant where she enjoyed being treated to a slice of venison. Over cranberry sauce, she spoke about her end time. In a couple of months, she would walk down toward the sea, sit under a tree, drink from a bottle of schnapps, and fall asleep in the snow. I knew that she meant what she said. In her rasping matter-of-fact voice, she then asked me to procure something stronger than schnapps to swallow upon reaching the spot near the shore. But I knew that, being who she was, she did not depend on me to get what she wanted. She made the request because she wanted a sign that I had accepted her resolve. After decades of wary independence she was perhaps ready to acknowledge fear to one friend. She wanted to hold me in her heart when the moment had come to step into the darkness.

On that November day I noticed something special in her - an unaccustomed serenity, but with a sense of its frailty. Without a word from her I understood that now she was ready for the step, and knew that the moment was precious. Scandinavian welfare systems are efficiently care-full and intrusive. For only a short while yet, the "art of dying" would remain within her reach. As she spoke, I saw her life-long, self-willed obstinacy slacken and got a glimpse of the glowing embers in her heart. Looking back, it now seems that this was the dreaded moment at which the Lord passes by. I would not want to abandon the ancient maxim, *timeo Deum transeuntem*.

That year on the same wooded path I spoke with Dom Helder Camara about the terrain onto which faithful friendship leads the believer if his friend is *desgraciado*, "graceless." How to let my

hope become so transparent at that moment that it does not throw the slightest shadow on the other? Helder said that fidelity means to stand by, aware of one's empty hands, and without expectation. We might or might not ever come to see the glow of grace in the other's heart. I remember his words as much as his wrinkled face, "When your hands are folded, they are ready for that *delicado* puff, when the right moment has come." He showed me how to do it.

Looking back I failed my friend. I failed to speak to her about Michael and his hosts ready to pick her up from beneath the birch tree, leaving the body behind in the snow. I failed to respond by respecting her freedom. I did not urge her to listen more carefully to what Moses called "the rustling." I took this headstrong woman's question as one more attempt on her part to remain in control. I now fear that I discouraged her from listening to the Lord whose calling she might have followed in spite of her complete ignorance of Him.

Soon after she became ill with pneumonia and locked herself into her home. You probably know that well into the nineteenth century pneumonia was called "the old man's friend." But the caring State could not leave her in peace. They picked the apartment lock in time to administer antibiotics. Since then, it is too late. Welfare and medicine have broken and confused her, made her into an inmate. Now she worries all day whether there will again be a bed for her that night in the clinic where she has been placed. She missed the hour of her death. She let it slip by, and lost an autumnal moment's desire to let go.

For over sixty years she had forged her own *bíos*. I use the Greek term that is opposed to *zoé* and *psyché* because the English word "life" cannot render the strong sense of *curriculum vitae* that *bíos* expresses. For decades she had left her traces on everything she touched, and then had been herself shaped by these traces. Catching her in danger of dying, society has deprived her of her *bíos*, her own life's shape. Bereft of it, she has lost the ability to disentangle herself. Far removed from what St. Francis called "Lady Poverty," she is embraced by professional wardens. They make certain that she does not take off her cloak. When she spoke to me at the inn, I had an inkling that she was ready to divest herself of all trappings (*nudus nudum sequere Christum* was the motto beloved in the thirteenth century), even if she did not suspect whom she was following. Now she is securely taken care of. The personal act of dying, which in English is expressed by an intransitive verb, is beyond her reach. Now that it is too late for graceful dying, she has become a frightened woman who shirks death. At eighty she has been socialized into the so-called aged. Sooner or later the house physician will write on her chart, "no more re-animation." This is the woman I ask you to remember in your evening prayers, when the lights in the chapel go out, somewhere between *fideliium animae* and *fratribus nostris absentibus*.

It is, however, not only the commemoration of my friend to which I wanted to associate you. There are also other millions in the Newland into which she has moved. And this switch from her to them, from the friend in distress to the inhabitants of the psychic slum, is not easy. I cannot reflect on her state without being impelled to ask myself, "Could I not have her live with me?" or, "Is there no friend around who could invite her?" As long as she breathes, the "Why can't I?" will haunt me. But I cannot allow this anguish to distract me from the issue that we must think through. Not the quality of care under which this one friend survives is at issue, but the fact that, after confiding in me, she lost what might have been the last moment at which she could have accepted her death.

I hope it is clear that I am not raising the issue of euthanasia (professional assistance in suicide), or the practice of medicide (which, in the terminology I use, implies an ethics committee's judgment on the termination of life-support systems). I am exploring two aspects of friendship characteristic for the late twentieth century: respect for my friend who judges that the time has come for her to choose between dying now and being turned off later and, second, the mode of spiritual presence to her, once that moment of decision has passed.

Further, I want to be able to reflect on this matter without being paralyzed by the issue of suicide. My friend would have been more than satisfied if I had presented her with a bottle of good whisky wrapped in fall-colored leaves. What she asked of me was not poison but a sign of unconditional trust. I can assure you that, at the luncheon, she was not contemplating killing herself. She wanted to die before it would be too late to consent to her own death. She explicitly wanted to avoid recruitment into that borderland where millions now vegetate who are neither here nor there.

All this I do not guess ... I know. We first met at a conference in 1975, called by the World Health Organization, where I was to discuss the theses stated in *Medical Nemesis*, among them the medical expropriation of death. Since then she had thought about the Nowhere of which I speak. She came to understand that, as an aging inhabitant of the First World, you will be recruited into this state in which you are made impotent in front of death, unless you make a timely decision not to let yourself be kept, alive or dead. These are the neighbours whom I ask you to recognize in your prayers, those whose *bíos* as persons has ended, but who are kept hovering on the brink of eternity as a result of modern techniques.

I do not know which word to choose to refer to this state of suspension and aimlessness, a spiritually debilitating *a-topia*. One reason for my loss of words is that the thing itself is new, a result of society's recent success in the war on death. Therefore, I am not speaking of the world of the aged. The old have always been with us. Nor am I speaking of the decrepit. Each traditional society

had its own way, for them as for the mad or monsters. One culture extended a place for them, another restricted it. I am also not speaking of those who, in the language of Hippocrates, have entered the *atrium mortis*, the antechamber on the way to the shadows. In the Greek-Arabic-European tradition, the physician's task was the restoration of the one, unique balance of humors, never a fight against death. He was trained to recognize the Hippocratic signs on the patient's face, that fey gaze which manifested that the patient's humors were irremediably out of balance. When his art showed him that he stood at a death bed, the physician had to return his fee and take leave from a room that had ceased to be a sickroom. The Hippocratic oath, which forbids the physician the futile attempt to heal those in agony, has been interpreted away by 19th century Hellenists. The halt at life's threshold, on Lethe's shore, the stop before the last step has been corrupted by terminal patienthood.

Nine out of ten Americans who are not killed by car, bullet or massive stroke become terminal care patients and become objects of medical management that deprives them of the chance ever to die. Intensive medicine has replaced the death struggle depicted in hundreds of illustrations of the *ars moriendi*. If you still recite the Litanies or the *proficiscere anima christiana*, you do so outside, in the waiting room, not to interfere with the life support systems. You pray for the un-dead, those who have missed the opportunity to die when they were still able to do so. You pray for those for whom modern care cum technology hold death at bay. I am calling your attention to a new Limbo.

Finally, I am not asking - at this moment - what physicians, social workers or policy makers should do with or to this new kind of people, or what their status ought to be in the law. They have become the wards for new careers. They are by now so useful for so many that -- for this sole reason -- the viewpoint I propose has become taboo. I firmly believe that the grill could protect your community from this epoch-specific evil if you decided in principle against any life-prolongation for its members. And more: your decision might initiate a public recognition of this evil and its remedies.

However, what I pursue is not the witness to graceful dying that you could give but rather the inclusion of the un-dead in your liturgy. I ask that you make those who are caught up in this new evil the beneficiaries of your contemplative action, that you consider them as brothers and sisters for whom you offer prayers, as Benedictines have done for the Poor Souls who wait at the gate of Heaven, at least since Cluny was founded. And I ask for your help so that those of us who have not yet been caught by such evil learn to avoid this peculiarly modern "fate." I myself ask for this grace each time I say the Hail Mary: "... pray for us now and ... that we may not miss the hour of our death. Amen."

I just mentioned Cluny. I did so because you are Benedictines and I want to appeal to your family history. Cluny is a symbol for many innovations, among them the "suffering Church" in purgatory. Only since the twelfth century has purgatory been understood as a special place, with "poor souls" who came to loom large in popular religion, being recognized as the most helpless community within a tripartite Church. For a good millennium, the Church had been praying for the deceased before this distinction became part of belief and iconography, and before the cult of the poor souls found its solemn place within the liturgy. Without getting into theology or the history of ideas,

I dare to suggest a similarity. The Church has always prayed for special people: the sick, those burdened with the power to govern, those specially tempted, for travelers and those in agony. It then added our departed brothers and sisters. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, the time has come to recognize another community that, like the poor souls, is marginal in a unique way. They are not those who after their departure -- since the Middle Ages -- were imagined by Christians as "poor souls" suffering from their temporarily frustrated yearning for final peace. No, those whom I pity are in the new class of the intensely risk conscious. Calculated probabilities keep them from enjoying the present and from facing as the supreme challenge the one certain event in their lives. Their reliance on science and technology, on welfare and biocracy has glued them to their bodies. At an ever earlier stage of their lives they are recruited into this Wasting Age. I am here to ask that you include in you liturgical *memento* all those who suffer of the progressive atrophy of what it takes to die.

Two decades ago the atrophy of conscious mortality was a cursed byproduct of affluence. Only people used to North Atlantic living standards would then foster the counterfactual belief that money spent on the medical care of the old could increase their remaining life expectancy at retirement-age. This is no more so. Risk-conscious and therefore preventive behaviour has become a personal duty. From early on children are trained to know the special risk categories into which they fit. They are trained to understand what they do now in view of a future, whose degree of probability has been calculated for them, and to understand the future as something which will hit them as a result of not having prevented it now. This trains them for life in a Nowhere, more precisely into a "Neither Now nor Then". This a-topic and a-chronic Nether-World accommodates standard consumers of the North Atlantic; Brazilian slum dwellers programmed for the home-delivery of the shot that numbs them for a month; aged nuns filling by now obsolete novitiates. I plead for your *memento* for all those stuck in this Nowhere.

My dear Sister! there is something special that makes it seemly that just the two of us should be solicitous to salvage the hour of dying, something which happened four decades ago. I then received a letter from your Mother Abbess in which she invited me to preside the ceremony at which you took the veil. That liturgy calls for a homily in which I commented on a particular way of understanding the veil, remembering what you had hinted at in a previous conversation.

Therefore I spoke on that day about the veil worn as a delicacy for others, not as a protection for her, who wears it. When you took it, you well knew what you were hoping to face. You has set out to search for the face of God. You had decided to live every moment in the choir, the garden, the kitchen or the library in the face of God as you would like to be at the hour of your death. And you knew that something would happen to your face and to your gaze that had better be guarded, not to shock and stun others

You know well what I mean. The hoped for attitude of a contemplative religious at the hour of death goes beyond that expressed in the fey gaze of a pagan who steps from these shores onto the ferry across the Styx, the expression that medical tradition has called the *facies hippocratica*. She has prepared for the mysterious gaze of faith, that is always blind and blinding, at the last hour is at its darkest moment: faith ends while eternal vision is still to come.

In this, our generation, the witness given by communities of cloistered and veiled Christian women has a new importance. It still is, as it always was a severe reminder, to let the shadow of the cross fall on the human condition. To accept mortality not as tragic heroes but as humble Christians. The existence of a community like yours witnesses to the possibility of living in the midst of Absurdistan preparing for a deliberate, intransitive acceptance of death. The veil that signifies the delicacy by which you hide your ever-terminal gaze from those whom it might appall could make you accessible to them at the crucial moment.

I still have qualms about failing to buy the schnapps for my lonely, leathery, godless friend. I still regret that I did not celebrate with her the insight that the Scandinavian "death delivering social services complex" must be resisted at all costs. I am sad that with that schnapps I did not toast to her godless but probably wise intent. It should have been the appropriate chance to look together towards our deaths as a surrender rather than the end. Please pray that God surprise in my friend in her last breath!