

# *Improving Spiritual Care at the End of Life by Reclaiming the Ars moriendi*

*The Art of Dying as a Remedy for Souls*

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*Abstract.* *Ars moriendi*, or *The Art of Dying*, was a highly influential fifteenth-century text designed to guide dying persons and their loved ones in Catholic religious practices at a time when access to priests and the sacraments was limited. Given recent challenges related to the coronavirus pandemic, there is a heightened need to offer additional forms of guidance related to death and dying. This essay examines the content of the *Ars moriendi* and considers how key principles from the work apply to the current context. The *Ars moriendi*, in its direct approach to the salvation of souls and thoughtful treatment of struggles faced by dying persons, offers a much-needed supplement to typical approaches to death and dying today. *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 20.4 (Winter 2020): 727–743.

*Ars moriendi*, or *The Art of Dying*, was an immensely popular and influential text of the late Middle Ages aimed at equipping the faithful for death and dying. The work attained wide distribution across Europe in two closely related versions, both available in Latin and the vernacular languages; the longer version came first,

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followed by an abridged version designed to accompany illustrations.<sup>1</sup> As Sr. Mary Catharine O'Connor established in her extensive study from 1942, the *Ars moriendi* probably arose in the context of the Council of Constance (1414–1418), which emphasized reform, catechesis, and devout Christian living.<sup>2</sup> At the very least, the *Ars moriendi* drew from and expanded upon a short treatise by Jean Gerson—*Scientia bene moriendi*, or *The Science of Dying Well*—that appeared at the Council of Constance and was widely distributed afterward.<sup>3</sup>

Although the authorship of the *Ars moriendi* remains unknown, O'Connor drew upon multiple pieces of evidence to hypothesize it was a Dominican in the south of Germany.<sup>4</sup> More recent German scholarship has identified a specific Dominican, Eberhardus Mardach of Nuremberg, as a candidate for authorship; however, the question remains unsettled, in part because the names of a number of prominent Church figures have been attached to different manuscript copies of the work, a common practice at the time.<sup>5</sup> The strongest evidence in favor of Eberhardus's authorship is a statement in a chronicle of the Dominican Order from 1470, in which Eberhardus is mentioned as “a man of great virtues, who wrote a book on the art of dying.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, at least three extant manuscripts name him as

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1. The strongest evidence for the priority of the longer text is that it is contained in all the manuscripts with the earliest dating. (1418 is the earliest feasible date, but most of the earliest are dated to the 1430s.) In contrast, the first known edition of the shorter text—the so-called *Editio princeps*—is dated to c. 1450, the year of the earliest known work of its illustrator, Master E. S. For a more extensive discussion that includes manuscript dating and a comparative textual analysis, see Mary Catharine O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars moriendi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 11–17, 61–89, 124–125. Regarding the dating of Master E. S.'s illustrations, see Alan Shestack, *Master E. S.: Five Hundredth Anniversary Exhibition* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1967), nn. 4–15.
  2. O'Connor, *Art of Dying Well*, 21–24, 50–51.
  3. *Scientia bene moriendi* is the third and final part of a larger work by Jean Gerson called *Opusculum tripartitum*; the first two parts are on the Decalogue and the sacrament of Confession. For a critical text of Gerson's work in Latin and French, see Gilbert Ouy, *Gerson Bilingue: Les deux rédactions, latine et française, de quelques œuvres du chancelier parisien* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998), 84–93.
  4. O'Connor, *Art of Dying Well*, 53–60. For example, O'Connor pointed out the text's tendency to refer to the writings of Dominicans (St. Albert the Great, Bl. Henry Suso, and Hugh Ripelin of Strasburg) and “friends” of Dominicans (Aristotle, whose thought strongly influenced Aquinas and others, and Pope Innocent III, who approved the order). Another Dominican might be added to this list in addition to those O'Connor identified—Hugh of Saint-Cher, who is quoted without attribution.
  5. For an overview of the debate with full bibliography, see Nigel F. Palmer, “Ars moriendi und Totentanz: Zur Verbildlichung des Todes im Spätmittelalter,” in *Tod im Mittelalter* (Konstanz, DE: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1993), 313–334. Palmer indicates that in advancing the authorship debate, it may be helpful to examine more closely how manuscripts attributing authorship to specific individuals fit in the manuscript tradition. I suggest in reply that if the original author or authors intended to be anonymous, then any manuscripts correctly attributing authorship would not necessarily be the earliest ones.
  6. Johannes Meyer, *Chronica brevis Ordinis Praedicatorum* (Vechta, DE: Albertus Magnus, 1933), 79.

author. The fact that he was not well known outside the Dominican Order strengthens his case for authorship, since there would be less reason to attach his name to manuscripts and a lower likelihood that his authorship would be widely known by other means.<sup>7</sup> However, it is also possible that multiple writers contributed to the *Ars moriendi*. As a result, attempting to find a single author might be misguided. Admittedly, the focus on assigning authorship is more of a modern tendency and should not stand in the way of careful attempts to understand the milieu in which the *Ars moriendi* developed.

It comes as no surprise that the Church would focus on preparing souls for death, especially at a time when one of her central preoccupations was saving souls from damnation and shortening their stay in purgatory. To suppose that this emphasis on death was driven mainly by the devastation of the bubonic plague is probably oversimplified; it seems, rather, to be a fundamental feature of medieval piety, stemming from a robust belief in the reality of life after death and the efficacy of the sacraments.<sup>8</sup> Hence, securing the visitation of a priest in the final hours before death was a chief concern. However, the effects of the bubonic plague, including the deaths of clergy who would minister to the dying, heightened the need for alternative forms of guidance—thus arose the *Ars moriendi*, a standard for deathbed religious practice intended for the use of dying persons and their loved ones assisting them.

The span of centuries notwithstanding, some contemporary bioethicists have looked to the medieval *Ars moriendi* for inspiration in discussing current approaches at the end of life. They point out that patients nearing the end of life today are frequently overwhelmed by the complexity of health care and miss the opportunity to prepare well for death. Something like the *Ars moriendi*, then, would act as a corrective to the prevailing over-medicalized, technologically driven death. Whereas bioethicists generally have sought to use the medieval text as inspiration for an approach that accommodates a wide variety of belief systems, religious and secular, it is vital for Roman Catholics that the expressed religious intent be preserved in such a work.<sup>9</sup> In fact, certain features of the medieval *Ars moriendi* may provide a valuable complement to current approaches to death and dying—

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7. For a concise overview of Eberhardus's life and writings, see Thomas Kaeppli, *Scriptores ordinis praedicatorum Medii Aevi*, vol. 1 (Rome: Santa Sabinae, 1970), 350–352.

8. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 301–303. Duffy claims, for example, that belief in the efficacy of the Mass for the relief of souls in purgatory led to a dramatic increase in priestly ordinations in the later Middle Ages.

9. For recent examples of works that use the medieval *Ars moriendi* as inspiration for reflecting on non-Catholic approaches to the art of dying today, see L. S. Dugdale, *The Lost Art of Dying: Reviving Forgotten Wisdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2020); and Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). Later in this essay, the strengths and limitations of these works as compared to the medieval *Ars moriendi* will be discussed. Ultimately, the medieval *Ars moriendi* provides guidance that is much more specific, practical, and devotional with respect to guiding Catholics in the preparation for death. For examples of articles that use the medieval text as inspiration for talking about health care reform specifically, see Anthony C. Ughetti, “A Contemporary *Ars moriendi* for End-of-Life Care,” *Ethics & Medics* 44.3 (March 2019): 1–2; and K. Thornton and C. B. Philips, “Performing the Good Death:

especially given recent challenges brought by the coronavirus pandemic, including more limited access to priests and the sacraments. The parallels between medieval and contemporary times extend even beyond the pandemic to include a general lack of catechesis as well as infrequent reception of the sacraments among the faithful.

The purpose of this essay is threefold: (1) to provide a general description of the *Ars moriendi* in its longer and shorter versions, including overall structure and content; (2) to identify key principles in the *Ars moriendi* pertaining to preparation for death; and (3) to consider how these principles both cast light upon limitations in contemporary approaches and also provide a remedy for them. The principles and basic content of the *Ars moriendi* offer a valuable supplement to dying persons and their loved ones in the end-of-life context.

### **General Description of the Longer and Shorter *Ars moriendi***

The longer *Ars moriendi* is sometimes referred to as the *Speculum artis bene moriendi* (*Mirror of the Art of Dying Well*).<sup>10</sup> This is an appropriate title because the word *speculum* refers to a medieval genre that characteristically presents a repository of information on a given subject—often religious—and the opportunity for people to gaze and reflect upon it as in a mirror.<sup>11</sup> As a *speculum*, the longer *Ars moriendi* provides a wide-ranging discussion of and instruction on death and dying as articulated in the tradition of the Church. To this end, it contains ample quotations from Scripture, the Church fathers, prominent medieval theologians, and a couple of ancient philosophers, as well as elements drawn from the liturgy and the articles of faith.<sup>12</sup>

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The Medieval *Ars moriendi* and Contemporary Doctors,” *Medical Humanities* 35.2 (December 2009): 94–97, doi: 10.1136/jmh.2009.001693.

10. To my knowledge, there are no published critical texts in Latin of either the longer or shorter *Ars moriendi*. For this analysis, I selected a primary text of reference for each of the versions and referred to a secondary text in instances when the text was unclear or problematic. For the longer *Ars moriendi*, I used the following as primary and secondary texts, respectively: München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, BSB-Ink A-762; and Köln, Universitäts- und Stadtbibliothek Köln, GW 2597. For the shorter *Ars moriendi*, I used the following as primary and secondary texts, respectively: London, Royal College of Physicians, *Editio princeps* ca. 1450; and Washington, DC, Library of Congress, Incun.X.A874. Note that O’Connor developed a shorthand to refer to the two versions of the *Ars moriendi*—CP for the longer text, referring to the opening words “Cum de presentis,” and QS for the shorter text, whose opening words are “Quamvis secundum.” See O’Connor, *Art of Dying Well*, 7. This essay refers simply to the longer and shorter versions for ease of reading.
11. Ritamary Bradley, “Backgrounds of the Title *Speculum* in Mediaeval Literature,” *Speculum* 29.1 (January 1954): 100–101, 105. See also 1 Cor. 13:12 (RSV): “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.”
12. The Church fathers quoted in the longer *Ars moriendi* include St. Augustine, John Cassian, St. Jerome, and St. Gregory the Great, and the ancient philosophers include Aristotle and Seneca. Of the medieval theologians quoted, St. Bernard, St. Anselm, St. Albert the Great, and Gerson appear the most. With the exception of Albert the Great, quotes from Dominicans are given without attribution—including Henry Suso, Hugh of Saint-Cher, and Hugh Ripelin of Strasburg. No other theologian besides these Dominicans

The work contains six chapters, described briefly as follows:

1. Commendation of death and general overview of the art of dying well,
2. Temptations commonly faced by the dying and remedies for overcoming them,
3. Questions on the articles of faith for self-examination and profession,
4. Reflections on the example of Christ on the Cross and prayers for assistance,
5. Instructions for the dying and those caring for them, and
6. Liturgical prayers to be said over the dying by those caring for them.

Interestingly, the fourth chapter contains concrete meditations on facing one's death, which may be unique to the original author of the *Ars moriendi* rather than drawn from authoritative theologians.<sup>13</sup> The text names five deeds of Christ on the Cross that the dying person should reflect upon and imitate: He prayed, He wept, He cried out, He commended his spirit to the Father, and He handed over his spirit.<sup>14</sup>

As for the intended purpose and audience of the longer *Ars moriendi*, the opening paragraph gives an indication—namely, of providing a “short method of exhortation” for those approaching death, since “all Catholics” may benefit from the art and knowledge of dying well.<sup>15</sup> Given the absence from the text of instructions for priests or chaplains, clearly the intent was to reach as many of the faithful as possible regardless of their training or clerical status. Such a goal was realistic in the early fifteenth century because improved access to education resulted in increasing levels of literacy among the laity.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the *Ars moriendi* was distributed in the vernacular languages as well as Latin further supports the idea that this work was intended for a wider audience.<sup>17</sup>

Even with improved literacy in Europe, however, those unable to read and those indisposed by illness still would have lacked access to the *Ars moriendi* unless they could rely on someone else to read it to them. The shorter *Ars moriendi* addresses

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is quoted without attribution. O'Connor hypothesizes that this lack of attribution is because the works of these Dominicans were so well-known to the author (presumably a Dominican) and his readers that he did not think to mention their names. See O'Connor, *Art of Dying Well*, 57. Alternatively, the author might have been trying to avoid calling attention to the rather heavy citing of Dominicans alongside the Church fathers and other eminent writers.

13. O'Connor, *Art of Dying Well*, 37.
14. The well-known medieval axiom quoted at the beginning of the chapter as a basis for the meditation, “Omnis Christi actio nostra est instructio” (Every act of Christ is our instruction), is attributed to Gregory the Great by the *Ars moriendi* but is of unclear origin. Notably, the thirteenth-century Dominican theologian St. Thomas Aquinas used this axiom in identical or nearly identical wording at least seventeen times in his writings; for example, see *Summa theologiae* (ST) III.37.1 obj. 2.
15. All translations of the *Ars moriendi* are the author's own.
16. Daniel Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity before Print: Jean Gerson and the Transformation of Late Medieval Learning* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 7.
17. O'Connor, *Art of Dying Well*, 61–112.

this limitation by providing illustrations along with the text; its advent correlates closely with the rise of block books, which involved an early printing technique capable of producing illustrations and even letterpress from woodblock carvings.<sup>18</sup> The introduction of the text itself states that “this work is intended for the eyes of all: with words to serve the literate and images to serve the illiterate and literate alike.” Furthermore, the main body of the text is clearly organized so that each section is accompanied by an illustration on the facing page.

Although the shorter *Ars moriendi* can be broadly described as an abridgement of the longer version, its primary focus is on the content of the second chapter of the longer version—the common temptations faced by the dying and the remedies for overcoming them. The introduction and conclusion of the shorter *Ars moriendi* manage to succinctly and directly convey the main points from the other parts of the longer version except for the sixth chapter containing liturgical prayers. O’Connor has noted that the shorter *Ars moriendi* provides a greater sense of compact organization than does the longer version; this is especially true of the introduction and conclusion, which provide an overview of practical content in rapid succession.

The main portion of the shorter *Ars moriendi*, however, reads more like a dialogue, with the devil introducing each of the five temptations and an angel providing “good inspiration,” or an effective and encouraging reply. These temptations and inspirations are each accompanied by an illustration, a deathbed scene depicting the dying man—*moriens*—and the various spiritual forces surrounding him; various elements from the text are cleverly worked into the images so that corresponding text and image convey similar content.

The five sets of temptations and inspirations are as follows:

1. Temptation against faith and inspiration to faith,
2. Temptation to despair and inspiration against despair,
3. Temptation to impatience and inspiration against impatience,
4. Temptation to vainglory and inspiration against vainglory, and
5. Temptation to avarice and inspiration against avarice.<sup>19</sup>

Following the five sets of temptations and inspirations, the conclusion is accompanied by an eleventh illustration depicting the death of *moriens*.

### Key Principles in the *Ars moriendi*

#### *Priority of the Soul over the Body*

Surprisingly for a religious text on death and dying, the opening lines of both the longer and shorter *Ars moriendi* present a quote from Aristotle: “Of all terrible things, the death of the body is the most terrible.”<sup>20</sup> The first chapter of the longer

18. O’Connor, *Art of Dying Well*, 113.

19. Between the longer and shorter *Ars moriendi*, the fourth and fifth temptations differ slightly; the longer version contains *complacentia* (complacency) and *nimia occupatio temporalium atque exteriorum* (excessive occupation with temporal and exterior things), whereas the shorter version more succinctly has it *vana gloria* (vainglory) and *avaritia* (avarice).

20. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), III.6.1115a26. The use of the thought of Aristotle in Catholic theology is characteristic

*Ars moriendi* emphasizes that although death itself is a dreadful thing, the death of a righteous Christian is precious in the sight of God. Both versions immediately build on Aristotle's philosophical claim in the light of faith, asserting that the death of the soul is "more to be feared and despised" than that of the body "inasmuch as the soul is nobler and more precious than the body." Typical of citations throughout the *Ars moriendi*, this assertion is supported by quotes from the Psalms, St. Augustine, and St. Bernard.<sup>21</sup>

This principle—the priority of the soul over the body—has central significance for the art of dying in both the longer and shorter *Ars moriendi*. For one, the tremendous worth of the soul motivates the devil to afflict the dying with the "greatest temptations" to bring about their "eternal death"; in other words, the devil himself understands this priority of soul over body and is thus primarily concerned with the death of the soul.<sup>22</sup> To prepare to face this danger, the *Ars moriendi* suggests, it is most expedient for everyone to have "frequently before their eyes the art of dying well—the focus of this work—and to reflect upon their own final illness."<sup>23</sup> Rather than simply being a deathbed manual, then, the *Ars moriendi* is intended to help people even outside the context of illness to appreciate the priority of soul over body by meditating on the inevitability of death and on the art of dying well.

Some of the specific advice in the *Ars moriendi* for overcoming the devil's temptations will be discussed below. In response to the general tendency to wrongly prioritize body over soul, the *Ars moriendi* provides two points of advice.<sup>24</sup> First, anyone with "love and fear of God and zeal for souls" should exhort his fellow Christians "in peril of body or soul"—that is, those who may die or those in a state of grave sin—to seek "spiritual remedy and medicine" above all other things without delay. Foremost, this remedy is "sincere contrition and Confession," which may also have salutary effects on the body and render those in distress "more peaceful and secure." The *Ars moriendi* points out that to this end, a pope had decreed that physicians are not to administer bodily medicines to the dying before encouraging

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of high scholasticism during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Aristotelian thought was championed initially by Albert the Great and then brought to its summit by Aquinas—both of whom were Dominicans.

21. The Psalms quoted in the longer *Ars moriendi* are "The death of the wicked is very evil" (Ps. 33:22, DRA), and "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps. 115:15, DRA). The quote attributed to Augustine in the shorter *Ars moriendi* is "Maius est damnum in amissione unius animae quam mille corporum" (The loss of a single soul is worth more than a thousand bodies); the quote attributed to Bernard is "Totus iste mundus ad unius animae pretium aestimari non potest" (All the world combined does not equal the value of a single soul). The precise origin of these quotes attributed to Augustine and Bernard is unclear.
22. The link between the value of the soul and the devil's temptations is stated more directly in the shorter version, although it is certainly present in both.
23. This quote is from the introductory section of the shorter *Ars moriendi*: "Ad quod maxime expediens est ut quilibet artem bene moriendi, de qua est praesens intentio, frequenter pre oculis habeat atque extremam infirmitatem mente sua revoluat."
24. Both points of advice are contained in the fifth chapter of the longer *Ars moriendi* and closely based on Gerson's *Scientia bene moriendi*. The shorter *Ars moriendi* conveys both points in abbreviated fashion.

them to seek a “spiritual physician,” namely, a priest. However, the text laments that this decree has not been consistently followed, “for men swiftly seek bodily medicine over spiritual.”<sup>25</sup>

As a second point of advice regarding the priority of the soul over the body, the *Ars moriendi* warns that those caring for the dying should take care not to give false assurances of recovery: “Often through such false consolation and unrealistic confidence in their health, [dying] persons run the risk of incurring damnation.”<sup>26</sup> The reason for this, the text indicates, is that the man who falsely believes he is not dying may fail to seek spiritual remedies before it is too late. Thus, through these various examples, the *Ars moriendi* conveys the significance of prioritizing the soul over the body and provides guidance in carrying this out.

#### *Emphasis on the Liturgy and Inclusion of Liturgical Elements*

It is already apparent from the previous section that the *Ars moriendi* encourages priestly visitations for the dying, especially for the sake of Confession. The *Ars moriendi* is not a liturgical book inasmuch as it does not contain the official rites, ceremonies, prayers, and sacraments of the Church to be used in public worship. Nonetheless, it heavily emphasizes the role of the liturgy and draws some content from liturgical texts.

The introduction to the shorter *Ars moriendi* stresses the need to exercise great care in the reception of the sacraments. As a preliminary step, the dying man should be able to affirm with a sincere heart the “things necessary for salvation,” a medieval liturgical practice that will be discussed further momentarily. Only then should the dying man “be carefully led to receive the sacraments of the Church with faith and reverence.”<sup>27</sup> Again, there is an emphasis on Confession: “First, with true contrition, he should make a complete Confession, receiving devoutly the other sacraments of the Church in turn.”<sup>28</sup> Any dying man who has not been asked or informed by others about the “things necessary for salvation” should examine himself to determine whether he is disposed to receive the sacraments; presumably, that means that either the text is available to him or he has already memorized it.

The shorter *Ars moriendi* lists the “things necessary for salvation” as a series of six statements the dying man should assent to regarding the Catholic faith, the reality of sin and the need for forgiveness, and the granting of salvation through the merit of Christ’s passion:

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25. The pope referred to in this first point is Innocent III, who presided over the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and the decree is canon 22 of the council. See O’Connor, *Art of Dying Well*, 38. This council was notable for its establishment of orthodox teaching on the sacraments, its requirement for every Christian to go to Confession and receive the Eucharist at least once a year, and its guidelines for preaching and catechizing in the vernacular. See Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 148.
  26. “Saepe per unam talem inanem et falsam consolationem ... certam incurrit homo damnationem.”
  27. “Deinde studiosè inducatur ad debitum usum sacramentorum Ecclesiae.”
  28. “Primo, ut per veram contritionem integram faciat confessionem, alia etiam Ecclesiae sacramenta devote recipiendo.”



1. “He should believe as a faithful Christian does, and even rejoice, that he will die in the faith of Christ and the Church, united with them in obedience”;
2. “He should recognize that he has gravely offended God and grieve because of it”;
3. “He should resolve that if he recovers, he will amend his ways and never sin again”;
4. “He should forgive those who have offended him, for the sake of God, and ask forgiveness from those he has offended”;
5. “He should make restitution for the things he has taken”; and
6. “He should know that Christ died for him and that there is no other way he can be saved except by the merit of the Passion of Christ, for which he should give thanks to God as much as possible.”

This series of statements is an abbreviated form of what the longer *Ars moriendi* calls the *interrogationes*, or questions for self-examination. The *interrogationes* appear in the longer *Ars moriendi* in two sets. The first set contains seven brief questions followed by prayers committing the dying person to Christ’s passion, all attributed to St. Anselm by the *Ars moriendi* and considered appropriate for religious and devout persons. These questions can be traced back to twelfth-century rituals for the Anointing of the Sick.<sup>29</sup>

As a supplement to the first set of questions, the second set contains seven similar but more expansive questions “after the manner of” Gerson and recommended for all Christians, both religious and secular.<sup>30</sup> This second set of questions has the advantage of conveying in greater detail, for instance, what dying in the “faith of Christ” entails: “Do you believe all the principle articles of the faith and all Sacred Scripture according to every exposition of the Catholic and orthodox doctors of Holy Church; do you loathe all heresies and errors and superstitions condemned by the Church; and do you rejoice that you will die in the faith of Christ, united with and obedient to Holy Mother Church?”<sup>31</sup>

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29. The attribution of these questions to Anselm (d. 1109) dates from the thirteenth century. From this time forward, the manuscript tradition regarded Anselm as the author, and so the questions became known as the “Anselm questions.” See O’Connor, *Art of Dying Well*, 31–33; and Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus; Series Latina*, vol. 158 (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1863), 685–688. The questions also appear without attribution to Anselm in two Augustinian liturgical collections from the twelfth century, the *Liber ordinis Sancti Victoris Parisiensis* and the *Rituale of Saint Florian*. See L. Jocqué and L. Milis, eds., *Liber ordinis Sancti Victoris Parisiensis* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1984), 67.1.63ff; and Adolph Franz, ed., *Das Rituale von St. Florian aus dem zwölften Jahrhundert mit einleitung und erläuterungen* (Freiburg, DE: Herder, 1904), 196–199.

30. In the second part of *Scientia bene moriendi* by Gerson, there are six *interrogationes*, which are mostly elaborations on the older questions found in liturgical texts, the so-called Anselm questions.

31. “Credis omnes principales fidei articulos et insuper toti Sacrae Scripturae per omnia sanctorum Catholicorum atque orthodoxorum Sanctae Ecclesiae doctorum expositiones;

Finally, the longer *Ars moriendi*, in its sixth and concluding chapter, provides a collection of prayers that are not present in the shorter version. Many of these prayers can be traced back to liturgical texts from the seventh and eighth centuries, and they probably are even more ancient in origin.<sup>32</sup> For example, the *Proficiscere anima Christiana* (Go Forth, Christian Soul) is contained in two eighth-century sacramentaries, which are primarily Mass books but also contain ritual materials for the dying.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the oldest prayer in the entire collection, *Reconciliatio poenitentis ad mortem* (Reconciliation of the Penitent at the Point of Death), is contained in a seventh-century Spanish rite of deathbed penance as well as five eighth-century sacramentaries.<sup>34</sup> Other prayers contained in the sixth chapter of the *Ars moriendi* include the *Commendatio animae* (Commendation of the Soul) as well as prayers to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Michael the Archangel.<sup>35</sup> The prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary is of unclear origin, but its opening line identifies it as a variation on *O intemerata*, a popular medieval devotional prayer addressing Mary and John at

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et detestaris omnes hereses et errores atque superstitiones ab Ecclesia reprobatas; laetaris insuper quod in fide Christi et Sanctae Matris Ecclesiae unitate et obedientia morieris?”

32. The oldest extant liturgical books from the early Middle Ages date to the seventh century, and little is known about earlier practices except what can be inferred by later texts. Christian liturgical practices across Europe before the twelfth century were quite diverse, with rituals developing relatively independently until a synthesis took place under the Carolingian reforms between 750 and 850. See Frederick S. Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 1–3.
33. Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 97, 107–109. The *Proficiscere anima Christiana* appears in the *Sacramentarium Gellonensis* and *Sacramentarium Rhenaugiense*. See A. Dumas, ed., *Sacramentarium Gellonensis* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1981), n. 2892; and A. Hanggi and A. Schönherr, eds., *Sacramentarium Rhenaugiense* (Fribourg, Switzerland: University Press, 1970), n. 1330.
34. The prayer in the *Ars moriendi* begins as follows: “Quaesumus, misericors Deus, clemens Deus, qui secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum peccata penitentium deles.” (We beseech you, merciful God, gracious God, who according to the multitude of your tender mercies forgive the sins of your penitents.) It appears in a Spanish liturgical collection from the seventh century, *Liber ordinum*. See Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, 69–78; and Marius Férotin, ed., *Le liber ordinum en usage dans l’église wisigothique et mozarabe d’Espagne du cinquième au onzième siècle* (Paris: Firmin-Didot et Cie, 1904), n. 92. The prayer also appears in five eighth-century sacramentaries. See L. C. Mohlberg, ed., *Sacramentarium Gelasianum* (Rome: Herder, 1960), n. 364; Dumas, *Sacramentarium Gellonensis*, nn. 2888, 2891; P. Saint-Roch, ed., *Sacramentarium Engolismensis* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1987), nn. 618, 621; J. Deshusses, ed., *Sacramentarium Gregorianum: Supplementa (textus diversi)* (Fribourg, Switzerland: University Press, 1982), n. 3977; and O. Heimig, ed., *Sacramentarium Augustodunensis* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1984), n. 1910.
35. The commendation prayer begins thus: “Commendo te Omnipotenti Deo carissime frater, et ei cuius es creatura committo.” (I commend you to Almighty God, dearest brother, and I commit you to him whose creature you are.) The prayer appears in an eleventh-century liturgical collection, *Rituale Beneventanum*. See A. Odermatt, ed., *Ein Rituale in Beneventanischer Schrift* (Freiburg, Switzerland: University Press, 1980), n. 213.

the foot of the Cross.<sup>36</sup> The prayer to Michael the Archangel closely resembles a prayer in the ninth-century Book of Cerne, an Anglo-Saxon prayer book, except that the version in the *Ars moriendi* specifically mentions a dying person.<sup>37</sup>

Based on the above examples, the *Ars moriendi* clearly emphasizes the significance of the liturgy for dying persons, particularly Confession and the other sacraments, and also includes liturgical elements in the form of questions for self-examination and individual prayers.

*Overcoming Spiritual Struggles: Temptations and Their Remedies*

As noted in the general description of the longer and shorter *Ars moriendi*, the series of temptations and inspirations features prominently in both. I will focus here on the shorter *Ars moriendi*, since its main section is devoted entirely to the topic.

Although the rationale behind the five temptations may not be immediately apparent, there is a clear structure to them. The first three temptations—against faith, to despair, and to impatience—are opposed to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, respectively.<sup>38</sup> The theological virtues are called such because they direct us to God; hence, the devil would tempt the dying man against these virtues to draw him away from God. The fourth temptation, to vainglory, is the means by which the devil especially targets the “devout, religious, and faultless.” As the text explains, if the devil is unable to prevail over the dying man with the first three

36. John Bossy, “Christian Life in the Later Middle Ages: Prayers,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 1 (1991): 142. The opening line to the prayer is “Intemerata et in eternum benedicta Virgo Maria” (O Immaculate and ever-blessed Virgin Mary). For an example of the *O intemerata*, see Michael Martin, “Treasury of Latin Prayers,” accessed October 30, 2020, <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/BVM/OIntemerata.html>. The gospel scene involving Mary and John at the foot of the Cross appears in John 19:26–27.

37. For the earlier version, see Arthur Cayley Headlam, ed., “The Liturgy and Ritual of the Anglo-Saxon Church,” *Church Quarterly Review* 14.28 (July 1882): 276–293. The St. Michael prayer in the *Ars moriendi* is thus: “Sancte Michael, Archangele Domini Nostri Iesu Christi, succurre nobis apud Altissimum Iudicem. O pugil invictissime, assiste huic famulo, fratri nostro, in extremis valide laboranti, et defende eum potenter a dracone infernali et ab omni fraude malignorum spirituum. Insuper exoramus te, praeclarum atque decorum ministrum Summae Divinitatis, ut in hac hora extrema vitae fratris nostri, benigne suscipias ac leviter animam ipsius in sinum tuum sanctissimum, et perducas eum in locum refrigerii, pacis, et quietis.” (Saint Michael, Archangel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, come to our aid before the Most High Judge. O most invincible warrior, assist this servant of his, our brother, laboring boldly at the point of death, and powerfully defend him from the infernal dragon and from every deceit of the evil spirits. We beseech you also, O resplendent and glorious minister of God Most High, that in the final hour of the life of our brother, you may kindly and gently receive his spirit upon your most holy breast, and lead him to a place of consolation, peace, and rest.)

38. The text explicitly states that despair is “opposed to the hope and confidence that a man ought to have in God,” and that impatience is “opposed to charity, by which we are held to love God above all things.” For a general discussion of the theological virtues and their purpose, see Aquinas, *ST I-II.62.1*. According to Aquinas, impatience is a sin against fortitude, one of the cardinal virtues; however, impatience can manifest in a state of weakened charity. Aquinas, *ST II-II.136.3–4*.

temptations, then he tempts the man to take pride in his own virtues. Finally, the fifth temptation, to avarice, particularly troubles those who are “nonreligious and secularly minded,” because the devil can more easily coax them to focus on the things they have loved in life. Thus, the first three temptations are a fundamental means of attack the devil employs for all dying persons, and the fourth and fifth are geared especially toward the devout and secularly minded, respectively.

Before discussing the remedies the angel provides against the devil’s temptations, it may be helpful to first consider some of the general points the text makes regarding the experience of temptations for the dying. First, no matter how strong the temptation, the devil is unable to force anyone to consent to it against his will, provided he has use of reason. The text cites the Apostle Paul to support this: “God is faithful and will not allow you to be tempted beyond your ability, but he makes with temptation a way of escape, so that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13). Second, the greatest physical distress can afflict the dying. This distress can lead to impatience and grumbling apart from the devil’s coaxing—especially for those who are unprepared to die or are dying unjustly—and may make the dying man seem downright out of his mind and lacking good sense. The text asserts that such behavior may evidence a lack of true charity. Third, for a dying man struggling with worldly attachments, his loved ones should exercise great caution not to increase his burden through reminders of the things he has loved; rather, they should try to maintain his focus on matters of the soul and of salvation.

Regarding the angel’s inspirations in response to the devil’s temptations, it will suffice for the purpose of this analysis to discuss two representative examples—the inspiration to faith and the inspiration against avarice. The first of these is centrally important for all dying persons because of the necessity of faith for salvation; the second is particularly relevant to those who are not especially devout, or as stated above, those who are “nonreligious and secularly minded.”<sup>39</sup>

The angel’s inspiration to faith touches upon a number of points, both theological and practical. First, the dying should not believe the devil’s attempts to make them question their faith, since the devil is a liar: “For by lying he deceived your first parents.”<sup>40</sup> Second, for those doubting their faith because they “cannot comprehend it,” the angel provides encouragement with a quote from St. Gregory the Great: “Faith in what human reason proves is without merit.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the dying man should take care not to mistake faith for something that can be known with scientific certainty. Third, the angel emphasizes the meritorious nature of true faith, drawing upon a quote attributed to Bernard but actually from Augustine: “Mary was more blessed in bearing Christ in faith than in the flesh.”<sup>42</sup> This is not

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39. Regarding the central importance of faith, see John 6:47 (RSV): “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.”

40. The first sin committed by Adam and Eve involved the serpent’s deception, which nonetheless did not eliminate their moral responsibility; see Gen. 3:1–19.

41. Gregory the Great, Homily 26 on the Gospels, para. 1. “Fides non habet meritum cui humano ratio praebet experimentum.”

42. Augustine, *On Holy Virginity*, n. 3. “Beatior fuit Maria percipiendo fidem Christi quam carnem Christi.”

to diminish the unparalleled privilege Mary received in bearing Christ in the flesh, but to underscore the fundamental importance of faith in Mary's vocation.<sup>43</sup>

As for practical advice in overcoming the temptation against faith, the angel encourages the dying man to think about the saints, including the patriarchs, apostles, martyrs, confessors, and virgins, all of whom were made pleasing through faith. The angel also recommends that loved ones recite the Creed repeatedly to the dying man so as to rouse him to constancy in faith and to drive out demons, who detest hearing it.

The angel's inspiration against avarice focuses on the need for the dying man to place behind him all worldly things, the memory of which "brings nothing of salvation but greatly impedes it." The angel invokes a saying of Christ to support this: "Whoever does not renounce all things, whatever he possesses, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). Whenever there is a temptation to love earthly things, the angel warns, the sick person should remember that the love of possessions "excludes the love of God"; as Gregory the Great said, "The more anyone is separated from heavenly love, the more he delights in creatures here below."<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of this inspiration involves the angel's direction of the dying man to the heavenly rewards that await him, provided that he rejects the things of this world. The angel exhorts him to reject all things that pass away "as if they were poison" and to turn his heart "entirely to voluntary poverty" so the kingdom of heaven will be given to him as a reward, as the Lord promised: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (See Matt. 5:3).

In this way, the *Ars moriendi* considers some of the spiritual struggles faced by the dying, framed in terms of temptations and their remedies, and provides guidance in maintaining focus on God and the next life.

### **Applying Key Principles in the *Ars moriendi* to the Current Context**

It is now possible to apply the key principles of the *Ars moriendi*—the priority of the soul over the body, the emphasis on the liturgy and inclusion of liturgical elements, and temptations and their remedies—to the current context. This includes considering how these principles cast light on limitations in contemporary approaches to death and dying and provide a basis for overcoming them.

One of the foremost points made in the *Ars moriendi* is that the experience of dying can sorely test a person's faith in God and in the promise of salvation. There is a natural tendency for individuals who are suffering on physical, psychological, and spiritual levels to seek out bodily remedies and psychological reassurances above what the *Ars moriendi* calls "spiritual remedy and medicine." What was clearly a problem in medieval times, with their limited medical capabilities, must be seen as an exponentially greater and more complicated one today, with all the health care options available to people as they approach their final days. The *Ars moriendi* indicates that it is best to prepare well in advance for this trying experience—that the art of dying needs to be cultivated and reflected upon. As a result, one of the

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43. See John Paul II, *Redemptoris mater* (March 25, 1987), n. 5.

44. Gregory the Great, Homily 30 on the Gospels, para. 2, 1.37. "Tanto quis a superno amore disjungitur, quanto hic inferius in creaturis delectatur."

greatest challenges and responsibilities for the Church today is to determine how best to guide the faithful in their preparations for death, whether near or remote.

A common temptation the Church faces today, in its efforts to guide the faithful with respect to death and dying, is to focus on the mechanics of navigating a complex set of health care options. Questions abound among the faithful regarding the ethics of it all: whether certain approaches are too aggressive or too sparing, how to fill out advance directives and decide on code status, when to enroll in hospice, and so on. These questions are all important and should be answered in both general and particular ways, but by and large, they concern bodily remedies. Granted, patients and their loved ones rightly recognize that they bear a degree of moral responsibility for the health care choices they make, such that these choices may have spiritual consequences; however, even the greatest care shown in navigating health care options amounts to very little if the dying person's soul is largely neglected. There is a real danger also, as the *Ars moriendi* points out, in overlooking the spiritual contributors to distress in dying persons and assuming their distress is of bodily origin. This raises concerns today that well-intentioned health care professionals may be giving increasing doses of palliating medicines to inconsolable patients who, more than anything, need God's mercy and grace through the sacraments.

Regarding the lack of catechesis among Catholics today, one of the foremost limitations in approaching death and dying pertains to the reception of the sacraments. It is typical for family members to reflexively ask for last rites when the moment of death is near, or if they are a bit more acquainted with the current vocabulary, they might ask for anointing. If chaplains or lay ministers are available and have been offering the Eucharist to patients and family members, that tends to play a role as well. However, Confession (also called Penance) is much neglected, probably for multiple reasons: first, the sacrament is largely underutilized by Catholics in general, and they may not be inclined to ask for it; second, hospitals and other health care institutions are not ideal settings for confidential conversations protected by the seal of Confession; and third, the acknowledgment of our sins is by nature a humbling and unpleasant experience.

Ordinarily, priests and lay chaplains should inquire with patients about going to Confession before receiving Anointing of the Sick or the Eucharist, both of which are sacraments of the living, meaning that the recipient must be in a state of grace to receive them worthily. Contrary to common belief among Catholics, the final and ultimate sacrament to be received by the dying person is not Anointing of the Sick, but viaticum, which is the Eucharist given when death is close to aid the person's passage to eternal life.<sup>45</sup> When death is imminent, the priest may also give the apostolic pardon, which removes the temporal punishment due for sins already forgiven in Confession. If the request for last rites comes when the patient is very debilitated, Confession may take on a generic form (e.g., the priest may ask, "Are you sorry for your sins?" and then give absolution after an affirmative response). Nevertheless, under usual conditions, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states,

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45. See International Commission of English in the Liturgy (ICEL), *Pastoral Care of the Sick* (Totowa, NJ: Catholic Book Publishing, 1983), n. 175. Viaticum is "the completion and crown of the Christian life on this earth."

“Individual and integral confession of grave sins followed by absolution remains the only ordinary means of reconciliation with God and with the Church.”<sup>46</sup>

The *Ars moriendi* provides noteworthy emphasis on Confession, listing it as the very first sacrament to be received by those “in peril of body or soul,” before physicians are even permitted to intervene. Granted, it is rather improbable that physicians today would be willing to refer their dying patients to a priest before administering any medications. Nonetheless, the principle applies today as follows: priests should be called early in the process for seriously ill or dying patients, and patients’ lucidity should be preserved as much as reasonably possible until the sacraments and other spiritual care can be provided.

It is an underacknowledged limitation today that too little emphasis has been placed on the importance of Confession; many Catholics would greatly benefit from the healing effects of this sacrament as they approach death, and it should be made more available. The *Catechism* presents a positive vision of Confession as one of three important sacraments for dying persons as they prepare for eternal life: “Just as the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist form a unity called ‘the sacraments of Christian initiation,’ so too it can be said that Penance, the Anointing of the Sick, and the Eucharist as viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life ‘the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland’ or the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage” (*Catechism*, n. 1525). When these sacraments are received early in illness rather than at the point of death, they may provide healing and strength throughout the course of illness.<sup>47</sup>

The question of whether dying Catholics today should be encouraged to affirm their belief in the “things necessary for salvation,” as the *Ars moriendi* phrases it, is compelling and should be seriously considered—especially at a time when the lay faithful have a limited understanding of the basic tenets of the faith. Considering that faith is an act of the intellect, it follows that true faith involves at least a basic understanding of realities pertaining to God, the Church, and the salvation of souls.<sup>48</sup> At the very least, dying persons and their loved ones could recite and meditate upon the Creed; the *Ars moriendi* recommends this in particular as a remedy for temptations against faith. The collection of liturgical prayers contained in the longer *Ars moriendi* present an additional opportunity to affirm and meditate upon the faith.

Finally, the *Ars moriendi* calls attention to another reality that is underappreciated today: the invisible struggle involving good and evil spiritual forces. When the *Ars moriendi* was written, most believing Catholics probably took for granted that the devil was real and had a role in tempting souls and that angels were sent by God to assist those souls. Today, these claims are much more likely to be questioned or ignored. However, there is a strong biblical basis for the reality of angels, the

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46. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops/Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016 update), n. 1497; and ICEL, *Pastoral Care of the Sick*, n. 264. If the person is unconscious, then Anointing of the Sick can be given, but not Confession or the Eucharist.

47. *Catechism*, nn. 1457, 1511; and ICEL, *Pastoral Care of the Sick*, nn. 98–99.

48. Aquinas, *ST II-II.4.1*.

devil, and other demons, and the Church has never denied this reality.<sup>49</sup> Even in the Our Father, the most fundamental Christian prayer, the last two petitions allude to the reality of evil spirits: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” The *Catechism* teaches that *evil* here refers to “Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God” (*Catechism*, n. 2851). In response to the concern that God would permit evil to have influence over us, Pope Benedict XVI, in *Jesus of Nazareth*, draws from the thought of St. Cyprian: “It can be as a penance for us, in order to dampen our pride, so that we may reexperience the paltriness of our faith, hope, and love and avoid forming too high of an opinion of ourselves.”<sup>50</sup> This explanation touches precisely upon the first three temptations in the *Ars moriendi*, which are opposed to faith, hope, and love.

### **The Role of the *Ars moriendi* Today: Engaging and Guiding the Faithful**

The great strength of the medieval *Ars moriendi* is its clear and straightforward presentation of the impressive array of resources maintained by the Church for the benefit of dying persons and their loved ones. In its direct, no-nonsense approach to the salvation of souls—along with its treatment of the real spiritual, psychological, and bodily struggles faced by the dying—the *Ars moriendi* offers a much-needed supplement to typical contemporary approaches. The challenges of the lack of catechesis and the infrequent reception of the sacraments among Catholics today are not so different from the challenges that gave rise to the medieval *Ars moriendi*; however, the complex health care options for the seriously ill and dying today present an additional challenge that threatens to distract the faithful from true preparation for death. The *Ars moriendi* offers a remedy for this in its focused treatment of matters pertaining to faith and salvation. When it comes to death and dying, people generally want to advocate for themselves and their loved ones as much as possible. To this end, the Church can and should take advantage of the high literacy rates across the developed world and in many developing countries. Resources such as the *Ars moriendi*, and works like it that preserve its principles and basic content, should be widely distributed for the use of the faithful.

As further evidence of the need for an *Ars moriendi* to guide people today in their preparation for death, some bioethicists have recently explored ways of rearticulating the medieval *Ars moriendi* in an attempt to reach largely non-Catholic audiences. For example, Lydia Dugdale, in *The Lost Art of Dying*, uses the medieval *Ars moriendi* as inspiration for an approach geared toward modern sensibilities and informed broadly by Judeo-Christian cultural practices.<sup>51</sup> She makes clear that her current rendering of an *Ars moriendi* is not a religious one; its strength, rather, lies in encouraging people to draw upon traditional wisdom to try to overcome the problem of medicalized and institutionalized dying. In another example, Allen Verhey, in *The Christian Art of Dying*, considers the content of the *Ars moriendi*

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49. *Catechism*, nn. 328, 391. For examples from Scripture, see Gen. 3, Job 1, 1 Sam. 16:14–23, Tob. 8:3, Matt. 4:1–11, Mark 5:1–20, and Luke 10:17–24.

50. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 163.

51. Dugdale, *Lost Art of Dying*, 21–23.



and adapts it to a contemporary, mainline Protestant perspective.<sup>52</sup> He emphasizes Scripture and the importance of both living and dying well by following Jesus; predictably, however, Verhey's work lacks an account of the Catholic sacraments and other liturgical practices that are so vital to the medieval *Ars moriendi*.

The above examples call attention to the significance of the medieval *Ars moriendi* in its capacity to guide Catholics today in the most central matters pertaining to death and dying. First and foremost, the medieval *Ars moriendi* can be used today by patients and their loved ones as a catechetical guide, as a unique resource for meditations and prayers that are rooted in the Catholic liturgical tradition, and as a reference for the many sacramental and liturgical resources available to Catholics at the end of life. For those who are assisting the dying, the *Ars moriendi* can serve additionally to encourage them "to reflect upon their own final illness," as the text itself recommends. Parish priests may recommend it to their parishioners as a resource that can both reinforce the role of the priest in pastoral end-of-life care and provide helpful guidance when a priest is not present. Lay chaplains may find it valuable to use the *Ars moriendi* directly in their ministry to the seriously ill and dying. For example, they may wish to read excerpts from the main text to patients to guide them in the profession of faith and the reverent reception of sacraments or to help them overcome specific struggles or anxieties; they may also recite selected prayers in the presence of the dying and their loved ones. In all of these ways, the *Ars moriendi* can serve as a valuable resource for engaging and guiding the faithful in their preparation for death, encouraging their full participation in the rich sacramental and liturgical tradition of the Church, and also challenging them to keep their eyes fixed on Christ and eternal life with him.

This analysis of the *Ars moriendi* shows how key principles from the work both call attention to limitations in current practices related to death and dying and provide a remedy for them. The *Ars moriendi* is a significant part of our Catholic heritage that deserves to be shared with the faithful, not just for its historical value but for its enduring relevance. Given the recent challenges brought by the coronavirus pandemic, as well as other conditions that parallel the Church in the Middle Ages, now is the time to reclaim the *Ars moriendi* for the Church as a remedy for souls.

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52. Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying*, 173–175.